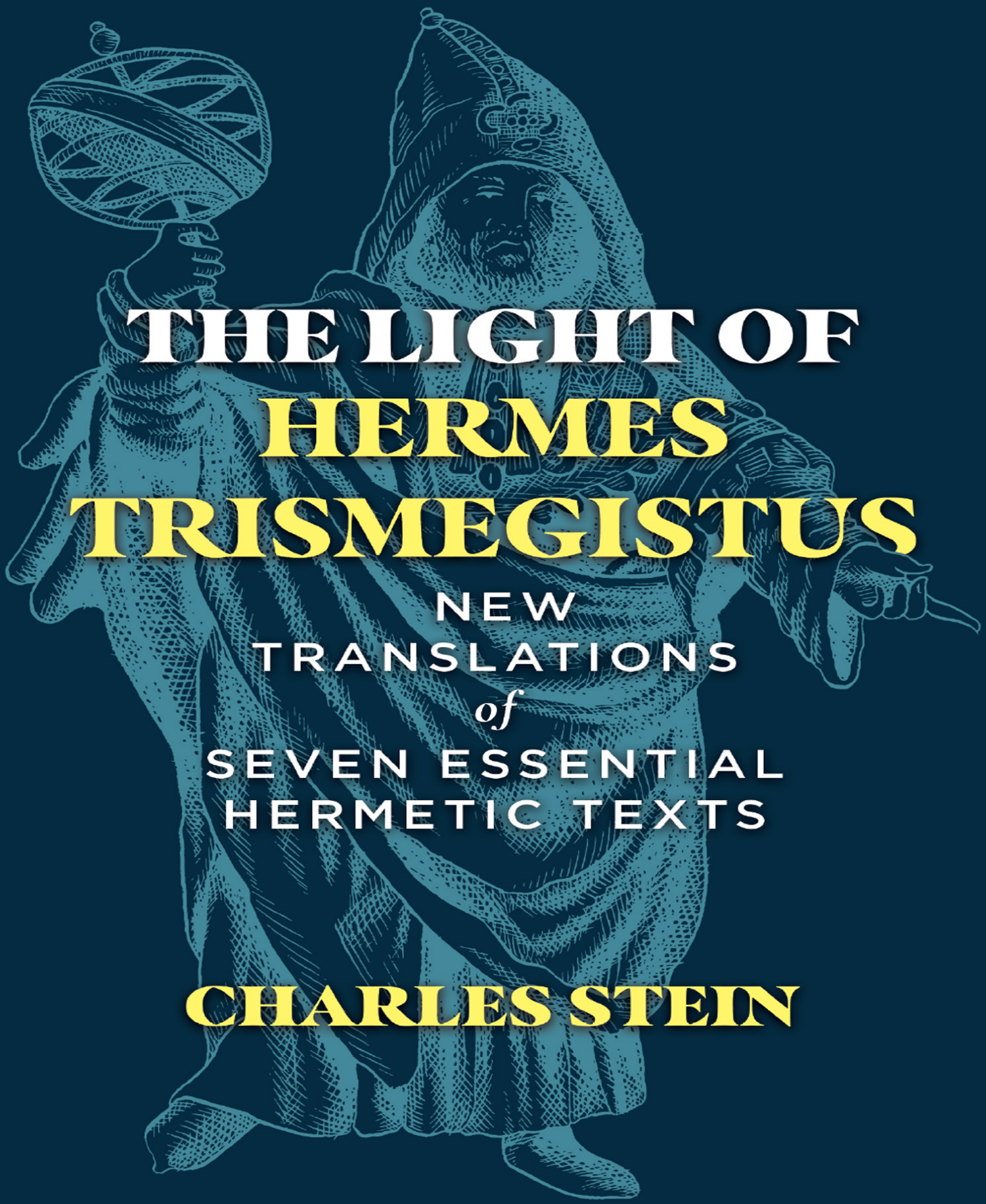
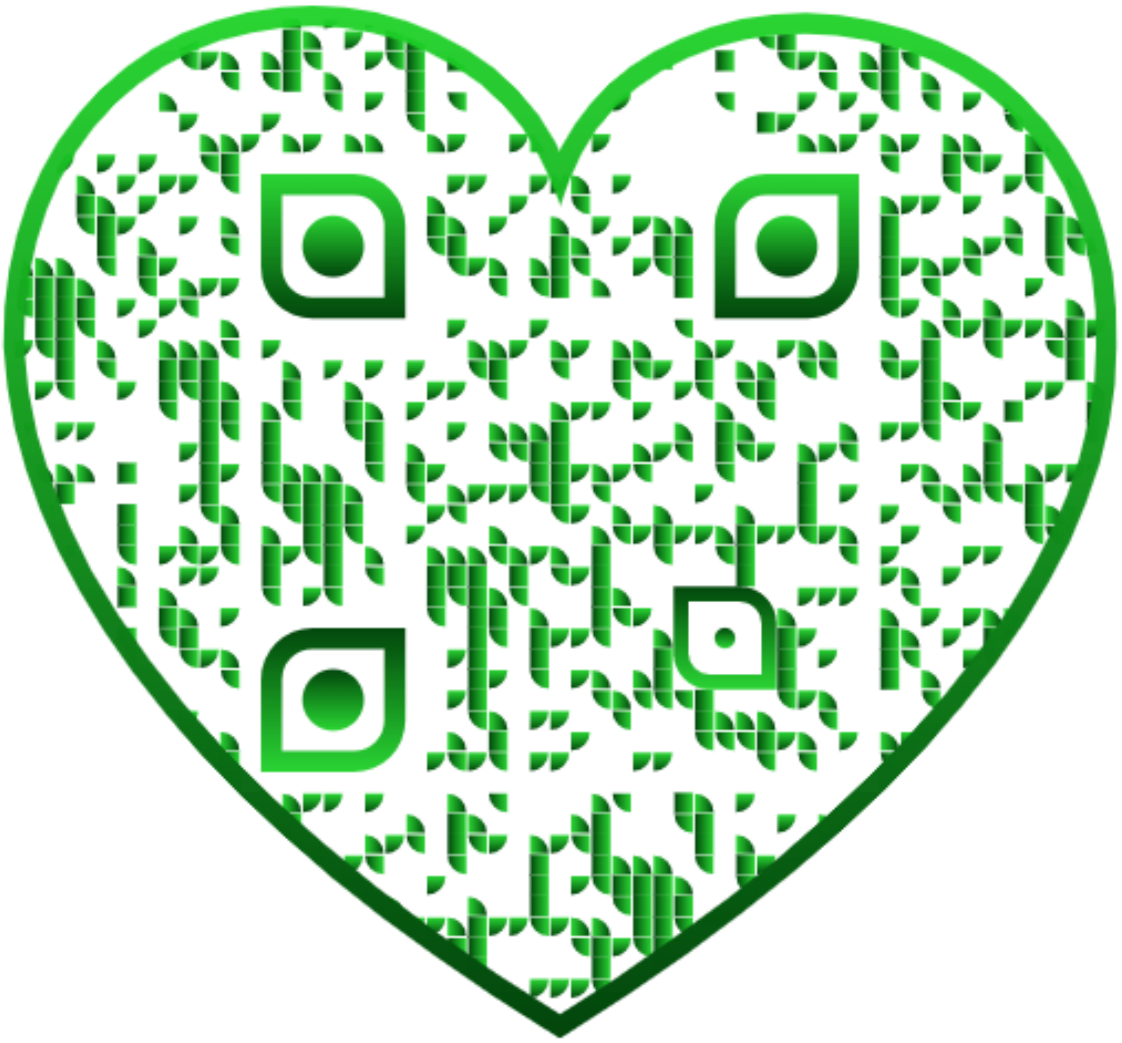


THE LIGHT OF HERMES TRISMEGISTUS

NEW TRANSLATIONS *of* SEVEN ESSENTIAL HERMETIC TEXTS

CHARLES STEIN



THE LIGHT OF HERMES TRISMEGISTUS

NEW
TRANSLATIONS
of
SEVEN ESSENTIAL
HERMETIC TEXTS

A Sacred Planet Book

CHARLES STEIN

Inner Traditions
Rochester, Vermont

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PREFACE

This book is an imaginative speculation on the possible present and future being of the God Hermes and his epiphany as the culture hero and initiating deity, Hermes Trismegistus—the Thrice Great Hermes, of the Hellenistic and Roman imperial period. The Greek Hermes had been identified as early as Herodotus (ca. 485–425 BCE) with the Egyptian god Thoth, whose provenance was, among many other things, magic. In the late Hellenistic period, when Greek and Roman pharaohs ruled pharaonic Egypt, Hermes-Thoth was known to Greek-speaking Egyptians as Hermes Trismegistus. He became the central figure in the series of initiatory and speculative tracts known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*. These texts were recovered in the Florentine Renaissance and translated from Greek into Latin by Marisilio Ficino (1433–1499). Hermes Trismegistus meanwhile, because the Greek Hermes was also the Roman Mercury, became associated with mercury, the metallic substance and with the practice of alchemy, where mercury plays a prominent role. The *Hermetica*—that is, the *Corpus Hermeticum* and other writings concerning Hermes Trismegistus—grew to be important texts during the Florentine revival of pagan mysteries and remained among the basic authorities for esoteric religion and syncretic philosophy that flourished until the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries all but suppressed that revival. They continue to be studied in esoteric circles today.

For this book on Hermes Trismegistus, I gathered and translated seven texts from antiquity. Two are poems with a prehistory of oral composition (*Theogony* and *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*); a third is a foundational text for Greek philosophy and indeed philosophy generally (an untitled poem by Parmenides, sometimes referred to as the "Poem of Parmenides"); and a fourth is the *Poimandres,* the initial prose tract from the *Corpus Hermeticum,* which I have found appropriate to treat as a poetic dialogue. The fifth is my selection and arrangement of the poem fragments that survive under the title the *Chaldean Oracles*. (The *Oracles* inspired

Neoplatonic philosophy and were eventually transmitted to the esoteric traditions of both European and Near Eastern civilizations.) The sixth, "The Vision of Isis," is the one Latin text I translated and is from the final section in Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* (otherwise known as *The Golden Ass*). This text, though also originally in prose, was translated as verse by me to preserve something of the rhetorical richness of what really is a fully developed vision of the Goddess. The final text is "On Divine Virtue," a tract by the Egyptian alchemist Zosimos, written in Alexandrian Greek in the fourth century CE. It is among the earliest alchemical texts we have and serves for me to connect the various guises of Hermes in the ancient world to the Hermetic tradition in the modern one, through the self-consciously Hermetic practice of European alchemy.

The texts divide neatly into the two periods from which they derive, the classical (and so-called archaic) periods extending from the time the Homeric texts were first written down (ca. 800 BCE) to the death of Alexander the Great in 332 BCE, and the Hellenistic-Roman periods, 332 BCE until the deliverance of the Roman Empire over to Christianity. The classical texts are the *Theogony* by Hesiod, the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes,* and the "Poem of Parmenides." The Hellenistic-Roman texts are the *Chaldean Oracles,* the *Poimandres,* "The Vision of Isis," and "On Divine Virtue" by Zosimos. Each is given its own section, and between the two groups is an essay on the relation of Egypt to Greece.

Each translation is preceded by a brief introductory essay providing essential information for reading the texts, and each is followed by a commentary, working out in various ways how I construe these works to embody, express, reveal, and project for the present and oncoming times what I will call the Hermetic Genius or spirit. An extended introduction precedes the eight chapters, articulating some general notions about Hermes and a few concepts peculiar to my own way of thinking, which are useful for following the commentaries. Some of the introductory material may seem a bit abstruse, and I hope its presence will not interfere with the reader's reception of the translations, which should, I hope, stand alone. The same, though to a lesser degree, goes for the commentaries. Nevertheless, since there is a philosophical project behind my work, I wanted to make something of its scope and flavor available to the interested reader. But the heart of this book should be the poetry. Where poetry actually stimulates our attention, Hermes is "happening."

The seven texts were translated by me over the course of some fifty years. They are not intended as scholarly corrections of previous translations, and they do not aim at rendering more accurately the intent of their authors. They are, rather, gathered toward what I call the further life of the texts and, more sententiously, the further life of Hermes himself. The gods, in the active imagination of some readers (and translators!), survive the dissolution of their pantheon. That is peculiarly true of the Greek gods. The cosmos ordered by Zeus and his extended family no longer configures the world for us, and yet these figures keep resurfacing and making themselves available to further entangle us in the mystery of "what is."

My experience again and again over the years in reading these texts has been that, as I work through the Greek, the translation forms itself in my mind and its voicing emerges on my tongue. I consider them more part of my work as a poet than as performances of scholarly control over the literary material. Nevertheless, they are not imitations in RobertLowell's sense as opposed to translations (Lowell 1961). They are translations indeed, a conveyance of poetic substance across the distanceless distance between ancient Greek and contemporary English, between a time when mind grasped itself under a divine aegis and our time when the very absence of the gods prepares the stage for their further advent.

I have followed the literal sense of the poetry as much as possible, and I have made use of appropriate scholarly information to the degree that it has been available to me. That said, it is still the case that the entire effort has been to project the poetry. I imagine each text as being read continuously, so that one might engage the continuous gesture of its music.

Not all of these texts make explicit reference to Hermes, but all, in my configuration, manifest his spirit. And it is the *further life*[*1] of that spirit that is my concern.

INTRODUCTION

THE TEXT ITSELF IS THE SECRET

HERMETICISM RECONVENED: A NEW IMAGINATION OF INTELLIGENCE

Hermes is the very principle of the mind in all its possibilities: from heights of intellectual and contemplative brilliance to the daily cognitive life of each of us, from a cosmic principle of creative vision to the cognitive capacities of birds, fungi, and microbes. Hermes organizes academic discussion and public debate and encourages the most intimate and private occult speculation; he stimulates insights (wise, cantankerous, or frankly conspiratorial) and delusions (deleterious or divine). Hermes manifests between things: between sleep and waking he is the bringer of enigmatic dreams; between waking and sleeping, outré or quotidian mathematical clarities, eternal verities, insidious machinations. His mood and attitude might be glad inventiveness, helpful and generous, sparkling with open frankness, tantalizing with unexpected phenomena in and out of the mind. Hermes sponsors scientific disciplines but also negotiates with magical agencies and Wiccan theurgy. He whispers in the minds of CEOs, demagogues, pundits, visionaries, curious children, careful craftsmen, secret sages, and underworld dons.

Hermes as the sponsor of intellectual penetration gives us modern mathematics, modern physics, modern technology, information theory, modern weaponry, and modern finance. Yet, Hermes as trickster knows that these smart and powerful practices of cognitive resourcefulness cannot penetrate to the truth of Being or effect a commodious alignment upon or

with it. There are mathematicians in whose psychic core nestles a will to unravel or further entangle the knotted skein of existence; it hardly matters which. These are the self-articulations of the inescapably inscrutable—that mathematics itself discovers paradoxes; that fundamental physics powers up from contradictory theoretical unnegotiables; that young physicists at Cern or Fermilab enthuse over the promise of enigmas to come! But far from gleefully celebrating scientific discoveries, where technologies seek mastery rather than harmony, Trickster Hermes countenances environmental, military, fiduciary, and medical catastrophes. We have given ourselves an ever-increasingly integrated global system of finance, information, and communication. These only exist, however, by a perpetual will-to-expand that threatens terrestrial existence as a whole. Is intelligence itself irremediably rigged so that it overwhelms, floods, manipulates, teases, demands our participation, sues for our allegiance, and torments our self-esteem, all the while entangling reason and existence in networks across the world, until it well might seem that our will to ameliorate our sundry predicaments—in short technology—is engineering our demise?

Our time seems overwhelmed by multiple spheres of intelligent concern that *must* but, it would seem, *cannot* be brought under a coherent set of views. *How* such views might steer clear of authoritarian dogmatism, head-in-the-sand private intuition, narrow professional specialization, or extravagantly broad but undependable fantasy is rarely discernible. We require not further elaboration of what mind we have thus far been able to muster but an altogether *new imagination of intelligence.* Any further life for the tradition of the Hermetic does not proffer itself merely as the continuation of ideas and practices of the past. These seven texts are offered for their hidden gems of insight and direction, some of which insights indeed are tried and true though eclipsed (occulted) by more familiar texts and contexts. Others have yet to find their articulation and their time of invention, discovery, or application. Still, without the *whole* of the Hermetic universe being brought to bear in principle, the partial activities of mind are subject to all the familiar consequences of intellectual partiality—global conflict, ecological devastation, fundamentalist confusions of all kinds (not only religions suffer from unnegotiably intransigent practices and beliefs). Here Hermes, slighted by partiality, plays the trickster and allows the conflict of ontologies to wreak havoc upon the whole of apparent Being. If *technological reason* is one *facet* of mind but has managed to project itself

over the *whole* of the world of our time, crises of climate change, habitat destruction, overpopulation, and income inequality would be the dark jest of that partiality—Hermetic blowback, the devastating games of Trickster Hermes. But to return to Hermes the dignity of a principle of intellect that cannot be fragmented is to heal the inescapably discordant multiplicity of the world, not by bringing the fragments together under a normative hierarchy but *by opening the ground from which this very multiplicity continues to grow and into which each phenomenon dissolves when its time-span form comes to a close.* What I call a *time-span form* is any continuing phenomenon: a gesture, a plan of action, a conversation, a poem, a narrative, a musical or dance performance.

These seven texts are central to a still-evolving Western Esoteric Tradition in which the principle of spiritual awakening engages creativity exactly where its dark twin—the inalienably transitory character of being in time—is also in play. *Solve et coagula,* dissolve and bind together, the alchemists love to say. The Hermetic work involves breaking apart and bringing together, incursions of things appearing suddenly and phenomena vanishing from view. That which has become stultifying in its overbearing coherence or manically prolific without regard to context or use must be dissolved to reveal the fresh, creative ground that still underlies its elements. That which suffers in an agony of mere repetition or random incoherence must be recombined, reaggregated, forged and fused anew under the aegis of an emergent harmony. That which is impossible but desirable must be delivered to and from means available from the invisible; that is, the Divine Background to all that comes to appear.

Hermetic work, in spite of its comfortable fellowship with abstraction, is concrete and specific. Its values proceed from action appropriate to its phase, not the rigid insistence upon atemporally lodged, abstract generalities. And yet the work itself follows from a principle of radical immediacy that is in time but not of time and is nowhere apart from intelligence and Hegel's "labor of the concept," the intellectual concentration required to make thoughts cogent and appropriately communicable.

Though all seven texts have been translated before, they have never before been published together. The hope is that here their points of connection and mutual illumination might spark originary insights in their

readers. The numen, godhead, or spirit, or what I think of as the Genius of Hermes, inspires the deepest kind of research—private, contemplative investigations into the nature of Being itself, as well as possibilities for new social formations. If, as one of the slogans of Occupy Wall Street had it some years ago, "Another world is possible," it is through a commonly communicable yet individually accessed ground of awakening that new sociality might evolve. What one discovers under such an aegis is the continuing reconstruction of the concerns of what, some years ago, the late Peter Lamborn Wilson and Chris Bamford dubbed "Green Hermeticism" (Wilson, Bamford, and Townley 2007)—Hermeticism reconvened for the renewal of the world.

HERMENEUTICS: THE FURTHER LIFE OF THE TEXT AS FURTHER LIFE OF THE GOD

The word *hermeneutics*—the practice of interpreting texts—comes from the Greek verb *hermeneuein,* whose root is the name Hermes itself and means both to translate and to interpret. Every translation is an interpretation, and conversely, every act of interpretation translates—carries across—the sense of the text into a new situation. Hermes is the god of translators and interpreters and of the intimate connection between them. Hermeneutics elaborates the meaning of a text, but it can also bring it back to an original sense, lost in the course of its previous elaboration. The future of a text springs in part from a renewed exploration of its past.

The late Henry Corbin, the French philosopher, theologian, and professor of Islamic studies, introduced to the West the Islamic understanding of hermeneutics as *ta'wil*—a term that he translates both as "the interpretation that leads the text back to its truth" and, more esoterically, "the interpretation that leads one's *soul* back to *its* truth" (Corbin 1960; my italics). Interpretation is not an academic exercise if understood in this way. It involves the very being of the hermeneut. To read a text whose matter concerns one's being is to place oneself under the interpretive colors of that text. Inspired reception, translation, interpretation, and committed reading share an ontological itinerary.

Texts accumulate meaning over time, even as they grow more distant in time from their point of origin and, consequently, more distant from their original sense. As more readers read them, meanings accumulate—as language itself forms over many thousands of generations. But an original impulse may be lost when too lavishly spent.

Once we acknowledge these aspects of both textuality and language, we should be able to see that ancient texts like those translated in this book require a mode of translation, or hermeneutics, that is not just interpretation but "deep reading"—a reading that is receptive to the accumulated and accumulating density of the text, that participates in its further accumulation, and yet reads back to recover a sense that such elaboration is in danger of covering over.

A text is never *only* what it was at its moment of emergence (though it is always also its *many* moments of emergence—each moment that someone reads it); a text is also its *further life*—its projection toward the oncoming *recovery* of its accumulating sense. In this respect, no text exists, in and of itself, apart from the process of the recovery of it. The process of further discovery may very well take the form of an inquiry into a covered-over, hidden sense. That a text offers itself up for such recovery provides a primary impetus for its being read—again, its further life.

One's reading can proceed as a work of recovery even as it projects what one reads toward further life. And because the further life of the text takes place in a time not yet or only now arriving—that is to say, occurs in contexts different from those that obtained during its composition—the newly uncovered meanings may certainly suggest things not thought of in earlier readings, even readings nearly contemporary with the text's origin.

What is true of a text—if it is a text that harbors a theophany; that is, the coming to appearance of a deity—must also be true of the god that is its subject. The further life of the text opens onto *the further life of the god* and does so by allowing possibilities that may not have been realized in earlier times to come to appearance now. As we recede from the time of the theophanic event that gave rise to the text, a hermeneutic search recovers meanings impossible to realize even at the site of its original *incursion* but that still are aligned upon the god's hermeneutic trajectory.

MYSTICAL UNION: PARMENIDES, BEING, AND A DIVINE BACKGROUND TO THE REALM OF THE GODS

The particular mode of spiritual practice that has configured itself in me over the past sixty years I owe in part to the text of the early Greek thinker Parmenides and to my self-granted permission to read his extant poem as a formulation of the *unio mystica,* or mystical union: the ineffable, even impossible, absence of distinction between individual being and the absolute ground or really the *ab-grund,* or groundless ground,[*2] that is Being itself.

The mystical union between an individual and an ultimate principle appears in different vocabularies and with different strategies of realization in all the world religions: union with or transformation into god or *the* god in the Hellenic Mystery cults, harmony with the tao in China, the principle of ontological emptiness in Buddhism, the identity between Atman and Brahman in Hinduism, the soul's consanguinity with Jesus and hence with God the Father in contemplative Christianity, the mystical grades associated with the kabbalistic Tree of Life in esoteric Judaism. Similar realizations occur in Islamic Sufism and Yezidi-related antinomian theologies (Wilson 2022). But my declaration to myself was that the universal form of mystical union is the principle in Parmenides to which the various locutions for Being in Greek—*einai* (to be), *esti* (is), and several others—refer. For Parmenides these locutions constitute the entirety of what can truthfully be expressed in language and engaged with by thought. But this apparently extreme contraction of the provenance of Being actually opened for me—and might for anyone else, too, it seems to me—access to the entire treasury of what sentient beings find *as* being *in* Being. Put succinctly, as I have in my book about the Eleusinian Mysteries (Stein 2006), the mystical path involves the transformation of the initiate or practitioner *" from being a being to being Being."*

That to which the Greek *Being* words point and their singular way of pointing form a unique juncture between language and what language is able to say, between mind and what it can know, between what we

essentially are and the ultimate nature of what is. For with Parmenides nothing can be positively asserted except Being itself: all other speech can do no more than indicate how *appearances* arise for us. Nothing that appears really "is" as it appears, and yet—and this is the crucial discovery—each appearance has a unique link to Being, for everything that appears, appears to be. "The illusory is real enough," Charles Olson says in *The Maximus Poems*. Or as Peter Lamborn Wilson puts it: "Reality is just as real as it needs to be."[*3]

Of course, the relation between Being and appearance is inescapably paradoxical, for our access to Being is through appearances that, in terms of what they show *in* appearance, are not. Appearance must abandon itself to Being, and yet Being must abandon itself to apparency so that we, who are ourselves apparent beings, might discover access to Being itself.

In my thinking, Hermes embodies that paradox essentially. He sponsors every manner of coming to appear and at the same time gives the lie to any appearance that is grasped too firmly as actually being *as* it appears. The *reification* of appearances (the insistence that what appears is an object or thing that really possesses the properties we perceive in it) awakens the Hermetic trickster. Hermes bestows the power to manifest appearances, to manipulate appearances, and to give appearances the lie; and yet, through the very power of deception, Hermes can deliver one, in one's very being, over to Being itself.

The most immediate consequence of this notion, in terms of the unio mystica, is that there can be no ultimate difference between Being and the mind that *thinks* it. In Parmenides's single, radically minimal assertion, the essence of the unio mystica—the absolute nonseparation between one's own being and the ultimate principle—is given a universal formulation in purely ontological terms.

But the Hermetic interpretation of the Parmenidean principle also shows how to decomplexify the tangles of conflicting ideation that beset our ever-more interconnected cognitive universe—the tangle of appearances that Teilhard de Chardin years ago named the noosphere (1955; from Greek *nous,* "mind")—the globe of Earth and its biosphere suffused with the ongoing cognitive adventures of untold billions of sentient creatures. The noosphere (I extend Teilhard's term to include what is beyond or just other than *human* intelligence) would be the concretely existing sphere of

cognizing sentience—the actually occurring activity of knowing the appearances of the world.

HODOS AGNOSIA: THE WAY OF UNKNOWING

Our lives are circumscribed by an impenetrable ignorance. We do not, ordinarily, possess spontaneous thoughts about how we came into being, and we have no way of giving ourselves testable cognitions concerning what actually happens when our life ceases. A twofold agnosia—ignorance or unknowing—encloses us. But if I carry my ignorance conscientiously, I can see that, regarding all the great metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological alternatives with which public intellectual space regales me, my critical sword of inalienable agnosia cuts two ways: ignorance of the nature of birth and death deprives me of my comfortable credulities (such as a positive belief in an afterlife), but it cuts through all the *uncomfortable* ones as well. I am ignorant of whether I utterly vanish without trace at my life's demise.

When we try to imagine what is actually imparted by each of the translations in this book, we might do well to allow our ignorance to take hold of itself as an *absolute* ignorance. It is not about to be removed by the availability of further data or the construction of more perspicuous or capacious conceptual schemes. The only instrument we have for engaging with the initiatory wisdoms vibrating in these poetries is our ignorance, but only if it is an ignorance vibrantly imbued with the living sentience that, in spite of it, inhabits it. My first tai chi teacher, Lou Kleinsmith, once put it (I don't know if he got it somewhere else): "If you think you know what you do not know, you'll never see what you've never seen." Drive your awakened sentience straight through to the marrow of unknowing, I tell myself. That and the surprising obviousness of the atemporality of "now" should *do it* for me. And it does. (See the "All NOW" section of my commentary on the "Poem of Parmenides" for what I mean by this.)

THE DIVINE BACKGROUND AND EGYPT

In the Mediterranean world that this book concerns, long before Parmenides, something like a Divine Background to all existence—a transcending and yet pervading god-imbued principle—was intuitively felt if not explicitly articulated. By the time the Homeric texts were written down (ca. 800 BCE), Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations with their fully developed cosmologies and theologies had been flourishing for more than two thousand years. The sense of a Divine Background recognized that the proliferation of different god forms in the different cultures had a common basis. If the context for the coming into being of the gods—their theogony—was such a background, the connections between gods with similar attributes in different cultures would seem natural. A Greek thus might easily assimilate the gods of his or her native locality to the canonical tales of the twelve Olympian gods without undue strain or cognitive dissonance. The ancient Great Goddess of Old Europe, as Marija Gimbutas formulated it, might have been represented in a given city by a pre-Olympian Hera or Demeter or Persephone or, in later times, by the Egyptian goddess Isis (Gimbutas 1982). The figure of Apollo in the Olympian system is quite distinct from the sun gods Helios and Hyperion; nevertheless, in later contexts he is treated as identical to them. And as the Egyptian pantheon from very ancient times organized itself around a series of solar figures (Re, Osiris, Horus, Atun, Amun-Re) during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, all the Greek solar figures could simply be identified with the Egyptian ones. One sees that identification in the *Greek Magical Papyri,* a body of papyri gathered by an unknown Egyptian of the Graeco-Roman period (see chapter 8 for further notes on the *Papyri*). The fluidity implicit in divine identity afforded by the intuited Divine Background shows that something like the idea of universal Being was a long time in preparation before being recognized as such by Parmenides. In Egyptian religion as well as Greek, there seems to have been a sense of such a background supporting the vast proliferation of gods (Assmann 2001).

The poems of Hesiod and Homer, though they represent the very formation of the Olympian system and are its most complete expression, nevertheless everywhere carry traces of a realm of divine beings that

preceded the Olympian hegemony. These epics suggest again and again that the gods participated in a principle of divinity that they did not create. Gods in general emerge out of a "divine milieu" (Teilhard de Chardin 2001) that precedes them and can often be seen to pervade them: a milieu expressed in cosmological terms. For instance, in the *Theogony,* as Xaos, Erebos (Darkness), Gaia (Earth), Eros, and Nyx (Night) exist before the birth of the anthropomorphic gods, these beings show a certain independence from the narratives of history and the intrigues of mythology. To be clear: I am not saying that the preOlympian entities in the *Theogony are* the Divine Background, only that their existence shows that the Greeks before the classical age were aware of a divine condition other than that of Olympus. I am looking to configure a Divine Background, even behind or beyond Gaia and the Titans, that remains the "same as it ever was" (to quote David Byrne) through changes in dynasties and world ages and indeed the history of civilization itself. The one word we have from Parmenides's Pythagorean teacher Ammonius is *hesychia:* stillness, a stillness that pervades the cosmos and that can be heard on mountaintops and other desolate places is indeed the "same as it ever was" and will succeed the demise of the cosmos itself. Yet that all-pervading stillness can be felt to share its eternity with one's most intimate presence, one's deepest attentive capacity for silence. Take that silence as a material symbol for Being itself: the ineradicable, the timeless, the sentience that antedates, permeates, and postdates the deities and the material cosmos alike.

Apart from this silence, intimations of divine existence that are other than the gods can be seen in the notion of fate or destiny that is often expressed, during the period of the Olympian regime, as the will of Zeus; but even in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey,* Zeus himself is *subject* to destiny. Athena tells Odysseus that neither she nor any other god can divert the plan of Fate to suit their convenience or benefit their favorites. The gods themselves secure Mount Olympus only after a ten-year struggle against their own progenitors—the old gods, the Titans and others—but Gaia herself seems to know that eventually Zeus will be succeeded, as he himself succeeded Kronos and Kronos succeeded his own father, Ouranos. And Mount Olympus, apart from its occupancy by Zeus and his cohorts, is seen to radiate a divine glow that was definitely not put there by the Olympians.

GREECE AND EGYPT

I must say a bit more about the connection between Greece and Egypt, for a few of the texts translated here have an Egyptian provenance: the *Poimandres* from the *Corpus Hermeticum* (and indeed a vast body of writings pertaining to Hermes Trismegistus, only some of which survive) originated in Hellenized Egypt. The goddess in Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* gathers to herself all the goddesses known to the author, though she proclaims her true identity to be the Egyptian Isis. The text by the alchemist Zosimos shows its author as a Hellenized Egyptian. We will have occasion to comment upon the aforementioned *Greek Magical Papyri,* which preserves a rather striking collection of spells, charms, ceremonies, and techniques for invoking and even *becoming* gods—accumulated in a rich syncretic mélange and written in Greek. In these papyri, the identification between many figures exhibiting the Hermetic Genius is explicit: Hermes *is* Thoth. Even the identity of Hermes and Hekate is borne witness to and called upon.

A PAGAN THEODICY?

Perhaps what is most difficult to understand about pagan theology is its apparent amorality. For the Christian, the Jew, or the Muslim, an essential task of theological thought is, in John Milton's words, "to justify the ways of God to man"; that is, to provide a theodicy. The powers and acts of the gods in pagan mythology are worshipped not only *in spite* of their lawless power but at times apparently *because* of it. Apollo's arrows initiate plagues and strike down living beings with an almost indiscriminate abandon. Zeus himself is sexually promiscuous and enjoys a truly prodigious capacity for every imaginable form of ravenousness, rape not being the worst of his crimes. And our Hermes, in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes,* not only performs tricks of charmingly magical insouciance but also kills animals, lies to his fellow deities without the slightest compunction or embarrassment, and bullies an old vintner into silence with the rhetorical tropes of a lawless underworld capo.

Rudolf Otto famously defines *deity* as a *numen fascinans et tremendum* —a divine entity of fascinating and stupendously awesome force (Otto

2017). The Judeo-Christian-Islamic god, when directly encountered in dreams and visions, shows these properties as much as the pagan deity does but does so in morally laden discourses realized by each theologian with greater or lesser rhetorical, logical, and ethical probity. But before the advent of philosophy, the reconciliation of an awe-inspiring numinous *tremendum* with Justice (Dikê) in a manner that would appear just to the individual human being is not so frequently attempted. It *is* attempted, though briefly, in the beginning of the *Odyssey,* when Athena accuses Zeus of injustice in his treatment of her favorite, Odysseus, but no inquiry into justice as such is put forward. The logical examination of the nature of justice has to await the Plato of *The Republic,* and there, a complete overhaul of what the gods represent is undertaken very much at the expense of the traditional theology. Parmenides's goddess at one point in the poem is named Dikê, but how this concern pertains to ordinary questions of right and wrong is not broached. Ethical systems generally function horizontally: they seek to adjudicate between right and wrong on a single plane of phenomena—human (or divine) behavior and intent. But in an ontological regime where the ultimate principle that should orient the soul's soteriological or salvational path transcends everything on that horizontal plane, the ultimate principle is not paired symmetrically with its antitype on the same ontological level but is instead established in a vertical dimension. It proffers a supreme value that is decisively beyond conventional, horizontally comparable or contrastable good and evil. Good is that which contributes to one's realization, and evil is what impedes it, but that contribution will be relative and volatile according to conditions and circumstance, not fixed by categorically defined moral judgments.

The plethora of cosmogonic myths propagated in the many theosophical cults of late antiquity testify to a hunger for theodicy, since pretty much every one of them narrates the falling away from a primordially perfect state. A goddess or a troupe of daimons overstep their prerogatives and create an aborted cosmos; or they themselves degenerate and fall into such a world; or the material world is created to compensate for a fault in heaven; or a celestial being becomes enamored of his own reflection and rushes to embrace it in the world below. There is an extraordinarily large variety of stories of this fall in pagan, Christian, Jewish, and Gnostic contexts, in the many existing Hermetic tracts, in Neoplatonism, and in various other cults and Mysteries. But what these cosmogonies and

theosophies have in common is a concern with the divine nature in its awesome or awful character. Their stories are visions or configurations of the divine that attempt to capture, confine, contextualize, and in some manner affirm the *numen tremendum* of the divine epiphany. Their theodicies "verticalize" the ethical dimension. The probity of human behavior and intent is reassembled in relation to the soteriological project of recovering a lost elevation, undoing a fall from the good.

The Greek term that renders this awesome or awful quality is *aidoia,* and it denotes something overwhelmingly horrific and shameful but also overwhelmingly splendid, as in Demeter's epiphany to the queen of Eleusis (see the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* translated by me in *Persephone Unveiled*) where Queen Metanira faints from astonishment when Demeter manifests before her in a blazingly radiant theophany (Stein 2006).

Aidoia, however, is not so much the sensation of being awe inspired by another as it is an actual quality inherent in the awesome thing itself. *Aidoia* also means shame and dishonor, but again, this is not so much the opinion of one's shame held by others as the shameful quality—something like taintedness—of the person himor herself. In any case, the same word for awesomeness and shame suggests that one is ever in danger of transforming into the other. Extreme value is adjacent to extreme defilement. What is common to both is their *numinosity,* shame or glory accruing to a mortal because of or actually *as* the nearness of a god.

An initiate in the Mysteries or a practitioner of Hermetic gnosis (as we shall see in the *Poimandres*) quite explicitly concerns himor herself either with overcoming the very power of the gods or recovering that power as belonging essentially to the practitioner's own transcendent nature. The practitioner becomes one with a deity or unveils the deity (his or her genius or angel) that is the practitioner's own true nature, but that identification with the deity opens onto and is only possible because of the Divine Background that is beyond the anthropomorphic appearance of the gods themselves. The gods are only gods because they share in this background, and the individual soul, if it is open to its true nature through initiation, through contemplation, through theurgic practice, shares in that Divine Background as well. In the systems of the Neoplatonic thinkers, for instance, the cosmic psyche (the principle that mediates the eternal forms or Platonic ideas to the world of temporal phenomena) emanates from the

mind (*nous*) that knows the forms directly; but then so, too, does the individual soul who emanates directly from the higher hypostases (the levels in the Neoplatonic hierarchies) just as the cosmic psyche does.

We saw above how fate or destiny transcends the gods and suggests the Divine Background but at the same time is represented as the will of the gods. In the *Hymn to Hermes,* one of the gifts bestowed upon Hermes when he becomes reconciled to Apollo is a power, identified with his caduceus or wand, of never being subject to destiny. Hermes Trismegistus is taught in the *Poimandres* that his own realization consists in letting go of the planetary (astrological) energies that form his mortal personality: *initiation overcomes destiny*. Time, understood as determined by astrological forces and bound to the circulation of the heavens, loosens its grip, as the soul grasps its own being as one with timeless Being. But time and eternity, gods and the Divine Background, destiny and the liberation from it—indeed sentient being and Being itself—make up an ontological tangle that resists the best efforts of the very mind that ascribes it to decrypt it. Like the Chinese finger trap, the conundrums of Hermetic ontology confound one all the more hopelessly the harder one struggles to parse them. And yet the mind of Hermes is clarity itself.

A GOD IS A FILTER FOR BEING

It is possible to think of each god as a particular bandwidth or color in the full spectrum that is the divine milieu. Each god would thus seem to be a part of the whole of divine reality, representing an aspect of divine functioning, possibility, or power. Alternatively, one might see the divine totality itself through the filter of the individual deity. Each god would be a particular way of intuiting the divine realm. The god *colors* the whole, as well as being a color *in* the whole. If there are many gods, there are many ways of configuring the divine totality. But both figures—the god as part of a pantheon or as coloring that pantheon—are only pertinent to divinity thought of *as* a pantheon, the classical system of the twelve Olympians, for instance. But if one thinks of the ultimate divine principle not as a totality of gods but rather as the Divine Background that is Being itself, and that such an ultimate is never truly *given* as a determinate whole but in fact *recedes* from intuitive apparency each time it is exposed *as* a whole, the

idea of each god as a bandwidth in the full spectrum no longer makes sense, since the full spectrum is not available. Nevertheless, the idea of the god as a filter through which Being itself takes on the coloring of that god is still possible. Each god covers being: each god brings an ontology that reveals Being as capable of appearing in the guise of that deity's attributes, even under the *primacy* of its attributes, but never uniquely so, never to the exclusion of other possibilities of apparency, other primacies, other ontologies, other gods.

We are concerned with the coloring that Being takes on under the filter of the god Hermes—the revelation of the Being of a Hermetic world.

CONFIGURATION

My book on Hermes is an exercise in what I call configurative theology, and it is a special case of configurative ontology. Later in this book we will be concerned with a configurative ontology of alchemy. I have written about configurative historiography in my *Persephone Unveiled* (Stein 2006); and George Quasha and I explored the configurative in art extensively in *An Art of Limina* (Quasha and Stein 2008). In an artistic context, the configurative abjures the positive claim of the figurative in the sense of traditional representational art but equally distances itself from the abstractions that much of twentieth-century painting explored in an attempt to replace the figurative. It attends work where the figure is allowed to return as an *emergent process* within the activity of construction but decommissions the representational attitude. Configurative ontology in a similar manner refrains from asserting an ontological position and yet rejects as well the (ontological) nihilism or relativism under which ontology is deemed impossible or impertinent. Configurative theophany and theology allow the gods to appear before the individual or collective imagination, either in a single incursion or over the course of a tradition developing in time (or indeed over the life of an artist) without canceling the relation of such appearances to Being itself.

Configuration is, on an individual level, very similar to what the Jungians call active imagination. The active, configurative imagination does not merely deliver fantastic ruminations or daydreams about the gods (though it might deliver these as well); it allows the theophany of the god to

assert its dynamic relation to Being, but it does so under the coordinate configuration of Being as itself divine, that which, in being asserted, bestows consummate value or valor on what it allows to appear to be.

Ontologies cover Being: they *render* it, allowing a view of Being to appear as Being in its entirety while in the same act *covering it over* so that Being itself, now characterized by its covering, is placed under eclipse or occultation. Under my configuration, Being never appears as it is in itself but instead *allows* appearances to arise that *cover* it. The *inapparency* of Being is its very power to *allow* Apparency, but even that truth about Being is occulted when any specific take—any figure for Being, indeed, any ontology—is asserted positively or absolutely. The occultation is lifted by the configuration of Being as *never truly* being covered but, when appearing, always emergently configured.

Configurative ontology would allow an ontological picture to form, but with the reasons for forming it made explicit. One must ask of it, as indeed one might ask of any ontology, what it allows to come to appearance that would otherwise be invisible or indistinct. But then one must also ask what it makes invisible that another ontology would allow to appear. French philosopher and literary theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard has dubbed this inevitably occulted matter the *differend* (Lyotard 1988).[*4]

Configurative art frees the imagination of the artist to allow figures to appear, without demanding likeness to anything but its own emergent character as such. Configurative theology allows a god figure to appear imaginally or intellectively, even to allow its transparency to Being itself to motivate contemplative practice but refuses to forbid the formation of alternative theophanies. Most generally, configurative ontology gives space for all appearances to assert their connection with Being. It is, frankly, the one hope for noncoercive harmony in a wildly multiplicitous world of conflicting ontologies.

My idea—and this idea shall govern how I think about the gods in general and Hermes in particular—is an extension of this notion of configuration to the subjects of history, theology, and ontology. Ordinarily, history attempts to "tell it like it was," but it frequently recognizes that this is an unrealizable ideal. What we actually get in historiography—the writing of history—is a picture based on a judicious selection of historical data governed by the application of ideological assumptions about the

course of history and even more deeply held assumptions about the nature of time. What we get is in fact a *configuration* of history that does not quite arrive at the configurative conception and so does not very often highlight how its selection and arrangement of materials brings to light what other configurations might miss, and it even more rarely admits that its own view renders other approaches to its subject matter unexpressed or even unexpressable.

One might notice that a *non*figurative but very much *not* a *con*figurative version of historiography is practiced by historians who exclude narrative and biography and concern themselves with cataloging data and arranging conceptual schemata to accommodate them. Data collection and abstract schemata for historical process would indeed be nonfigurative, but their exclusivity would require that any configurative historiography be suppressed.

What, then, is the *differend* for my Parmenidean understanding of ontology? Simply that absolute ontological systems are rendered incredible. All positive ontology is void, including the commitments to ontological nihilism. If Being is not, that inexistence is not accessible from this discourse.

A configurative theophany—which is truly what this book about Hermes aspires if not to *realize* at least to *encourage*—would be one that, while abjuring any positive claims about the being of the gods (both their existence and their character), nevertheless welcomes their coming to appearance in the active imagination where even figurative theophanies can be reexperienced configuratively. And it does so not only without asserting that the gods do not really exist (by insisting upon the illusory nature of any fully figurative theophany) but also by configuring Being itself as the Divine Background of the gods. It makes the single metaontological assertion that only Being truly can be said to be, along with its immediate corollary that every appearance in its appearance *calls upon Being*—as appearance always points to or makes an appeal to Being.

The conversion of the figurative into the configurative shifts emphasis from the supposed definiteness of the object figured to the activity of the writer or other maker doing the figuring, and yet it is not an appeal to the merely subjective aspect of cognitive experience. It does not challenge the ultimate objectivity of Being itself as independent of subjective elaboration

or projection. It does hold, however, that an object *as* specified by a subject cannot be independent of the terms of that specification. The property discerned in a relation cannot be snuck back into the object by a backdoor. The only backdoor is Being itself, and Being does not reveal its properties. And yet configuration affirms an inalienable connection with Being for any and every mode of apparency. Allowing the Divine Background to configure Being brings into apparency a *Pan-entheistic* ontology:[*5] all the gods as configured apparencies are covered by Being. Like the *purusha* of Vedic India, Being stands up "ten fingers beyond" (Doniger 1981) the totality of all that appears to be. All apparencies are in Being, Being is in all apparencies, but Being itself is not restricted to these immanences.

Being's own "objectivity" actually is antecedent to every division between subject and object. One can say that any determination of being *qua* Being, however, is an appearance that covers over Being, leaving Being itself independent of such determination. The desire to commit thought to objective reality stems from the secret but indissociable intimacy (to the point of identity) between thought and Being. It is a desire that cannot be satisfied by discourse, no matter how disciplined or assiduously committed to objectivity. It is satisfied only by what I call the *requiescence* of one's being to Being itself, the intuitive discovery of one's being as . . . Being.

THE INCURSIVE MOMENT

In the commentaries I often speak of the event in which a deity spontaneously breaks into the life of a culture or the concrete experience of an individual as an incursive event, an incursive moment, or simply an incursion. I mean an event in which something of an unknown origin enters sentient life in such a way that what existed before that event is shaken up, changed, rearranged, given a new perspective, caused to be abandoned, or configured anew. "News from the realm of the gods" occasionally manifests in this way—for example, in the dreams or visions of a prophet or culture hero—though truly incursive events can occur to anyone. The incursion may literally take place in the blink of an eye or, more mysteriously, over an extended period of time, slowly transforming an individual's existence or coming to pervade an entire civilization. In that sense I will speak of Egypt

as the incursion of timeless eternity onto the stage of modern (post-Neolithic) humanity.

But the sudden incursion of a divine entity can thus take many forms: a burst of energy, a luminous presence, a change in the quality of light, a brainstorm signaling an influx of affect or capacity or a new way of thinking or perceiving, a manic episode, or a full-blown psychosis. It may manifest as an expansion of consciousness during ritual practice, meditation, or the ingestion of entheogenic substances; it may follow upon a direct transmission from a person who possesses the power to induce altered states of sentience; it may occur as a direct encounter with an entity that imparts something verbally or nonverbally; and finally, it may transpire as a dramatic if nevertheless temporally extended cultural event that changes the very being of a civilization or even of civilization itself. And an incursion may take place in a moment but wait for conditions to ripen before inducing its effects.

I borrow the idea of incursion from poet and Blakean thinker John Clarke's *From Feathers to Iron* (1987). Clarke tells a general story of how poets who found cultural traditions through their verses experience incursions of such influxes—energies or informations—that must be stored in the poet's being and brought to creative order when conditions of various sorts are propitious. Clarke imagines the poet as having a kind of psychic "pouch" or "wallet"—basically his or her inner capacity to receive, assimilate, and eventually give poetic form to what has been received—in which to store the divine incursion until such time as it can be put to use in the poet's work. In *Persephone Unveiled,* I speak of incursion as fundamentally a "being-creating" or "being-disrupting" agency: the god arrives to break up old patterns and allow new formations to appear or else brings new order to a presently inchoate situation (Stein 2006). It is the proverbial bolt from the blue, represented in the tarot (so useful to latter-day Hermetic orders) by the Tower card (XVI), on which a tower is struck by lightning: the edifice of biological evolution, cognitive habits, and language —the ontologically quotidian state of things—is struck by lightning, and its inhabitants, or one's conditioned identities, are rigorously expelled.

The incursive moment changes it all; and yet, unless properly stored in its poetic wallet (and in this case anyone, not only a poet, may possess such a wallet—some way of receiving and storing the incursive, potential

significances), the intuition, the gnosis, the flash may only be available during its transitory occurrence. When the moment of incursion passes, even the most exacting formulation or expression of it is but its trace—at most a testimony to a passing spasm of illumination or to the recuperation from an unanticipated orgasm of disruption. And even if the incursion occurs repeatedly (like the satori episodes in a Zen meditator's practice), it is yet ever fresh, ever the first time out, ever the habitation of its own principle, its own initiation, its own perfection. Still, the intervention becomes a permanent acquisition not so much through its registration by consciousness in an experience but in its integration and use.

Often new symbolism is spawned by an incursion: a new cultural or religious image or even a new system of symbols may be sparked into apparency by such an occurrence, and an event of incursive spirituality can often be found to nestle at the core of a trenchant symbol. The transformation of the incursive energy into a new symbolic formulation of its divine source, however, is quite different from the event itself. The incursion can be and often is violent, disruptive, disturbing, as something alien to one's firmly established sense of reality breaks in upon the scene and introduces an unfamiliar ontological setting.

Incursive events are probably much more common than their actual incorporation into a sustained worldview. Instead of being transformed into a cogent symbol of the divine, they may be neutralized, suppressed, forgotten, or simply ignored—or they may cause disruptions so disturbing that they do not progress to ontological transformation or further integration. Or, again contrariwise, the symbol or symbolic system might establish a new norm, a new way of relating to Being and ordering the world. Incursion and symbolism are two contrasting modalities of concrete spiritual experience, in spite of the intimacy of their connection. Their laws are of a contrasting order. The symbol propagates itself. The incursion erases itself.

ONE

THE THEOGONY OF HESIOD

INTRODUCTION

Hesiod's *Theogony* was originally composed orally by trained bards or poet-singers associated with local communities. The bards performed improvised versions of the traditional stories about the gods as they were celebrated in local festivals or venerated in local cults. Though the *Theogony* is the premier Greek text about the coming into being of the cosmos and its gods, its stories took the form they have in Hesiod's poem after having been sung in many variations by generations of local bards.

The *Theogony* belongs to the same group of poems as the Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey,* and the collection of introductory poems known as the *Homeric Hymns,* of which the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* is one. Though all these poems survive as texts, many of which were first written down in the eighth century BCE when the Phoenician alphabet was adapted to the Greek language, the oral traditions that preceded them date back at least to the time of the historical Trojan War, about 1200 BCE. But some cultural material in these poems derives from deeper in the Mycenaean period (which began about 1900 BCE and continued to about 1100) and even before that to Indo-European and other poetic practices of undatable antiquity. Ancient Greek belongs to the family of Indo-European tongues, which includes (among many others) Sanskrit, Avestan (the language of ancient Persia), Latin, Proto-BalticSlavic, and, on the other end of history, all modern European languages. Details of the stories, the role of the singer of the poems, and their general style may have originated at any time along the way to their registration in writing. The basic theme of the *Theogony*—the generation of the gods and the formation of the world—shares motifs from the earlier theogonies of the Mediterranean,

Mesopotamian, and North African worlds, in particular Sumer, Babylonia, and Egypt. These civilizations had their own theogonies, and scholars have unveiled stories similar to the narratives in Hesiod's poem in many of them, so the actual background for the *Theogony* involves the confluence of two vast cultural streams: the Indo-European and the Afro-Semitic (Bernal 1987). How all this occurred continues to occupy contemporary scholars.

The names Homer and Hesiod probably do not belong to historical persons. Their names are products of the same mythopoetic process that evolved their poems, though this idea is a very recent one. As far as the ancient Greeks were concerned, Homer and Hesiod were actual poets, both of whom lived circa 1000 BCE and even vied with each other at festivals that sported competitions between the poets. A poem dramatizing one such encounter survives in the Homeric dialect.

The theory that Homeric and Hesiodic poetry was originally composed orally and only later written down gained hold of the scholarly community in the middle of the past century, due to the work of Milman Parry, Albert Lord (2000), and others. The theory is based on the formulaic character of Homeric language, that this standard poetic diction facilitated improvisation within the metrical form of the verse. There is no consensus about how the final texts of these poems attained the forms in which we have them, but there is general agreement that a long stage of oral composition preceded their registration in writing.

The archaic (800–500 BCE) and classical (480–323 BCE) ages together span the period from the advent of Greek writing through the death of Alexander the Great. During much of this time, audiences experienced the poems of Homer and Hesiod at local celebrations honoring regional heroes and gods with local identities or in Pan-Hellenic festivals organized to solidify the sense that the many Greek-speaking city-states (*polis,* plural *poleis*) shared a common world. It is often argued that the establishment of the Homeric poems as *texts* was part of a Pan-Hellenic tendency that included, besides these poems, the Olympian games, the Delphic oracle, and the growing hegemony of the Athenian state as a commercial empire. The language of Homeric poetry is an amalgam of several Greek dialects and was never actually spoken by a specific community.

The Greeks adopted a form of the Phoenician alphabet some time during the eighth century as I mentioned, so the advent of writing and the

final form of the Homeric (and Hesiodic) poems takes place at about the same time. During the reign of the Athenian tyrant Peisistratus (d. 527 BCE), rules were established for the correct recitation of the Homeric poems.

Homer and Hesiod, then, are the names of poets imagined to have authored what eventually became the group of texts attributed to them. The name Hesiod itself simply means "the one who utters the songs." Like the names of many of the minor gods who come into being in his *Theogony,* Hesiod is a nominalization based on words that stand for his activities.

The *Theogony* tells, for a modern reader, a fourfold story: the mythological account of the birth of the gods, the establishment of the twelve Olympian deities as masters of the cosmos, a history of the birth of the cosmos as such, and, incidentally, the emergence of civilized human life from a lawless and unmanageable condition of being prior to civilization—civilization understood as coemergent with the Olympian hegemony, the regimentation not only of the gods but also of the cosmos and the polities under their sway.

The *Theogony,* then, sings of the coming into being of the gods and their establishment of the classical Hellenic universe. Zeus, Hera, Athena, Aphrodite, Apollo, Artemis, Hermes, Hephaistos, Demeter, Hades, Poseidon, and Dionysos all have homes on Mount Olympus, a mountain in north central Greece, imagined at the same time as being their abode in the skies. They have achieved secure possession of Mount Olympus through victory in a war fought against a previous generation of deities, the Titans, and that war occupies much of Hesiod's poem.

What exactly are we hearing when we read Homer or Hesiod? Surely it is the end point of a process of formation; it is *the collective voice* of that process, or a voice that emerges supervening upon it, speaking or singing to us. But before the poem was given final form by being written down, each oral performance was given by "the utterer of the song"; that is, each oral poet *was* Hesiod. In our time, that role of uttering the song accrues to its translators and any of us in the moment of our reading it. There is a historical series that runs from poet-singers, through the *rhapsodes* (the official performers of the poems once they were no longer being improvised) to the translators, the more or less continuous transmission of an identity that must be recomposed in each generation. The poems were

from the beginning translations for the bards themselves as much as for the rhapsodes and for us literal translators, for even those poets were bringing across in their performances stories that already existed and were being delivered in contemporary form in their voices.

Poetry awakens its contents in our minds but as a content that we are receiving from the poems. That is in any case true for me, for I undertook to translate complete versions of this poetry because I found myself spontaneously composing it in English as I worked with the Greek. Since Hermes himself lends his name to the Greek word for translation and interpretation, I have always felt the act of translation as being a kind of devotional response to the voice of the poems as it formed itself in my own voice, as if the Muses who "blew a singer's voice" into Hesiod's were taking the situation of translation to allow a clearly Hermetic function to keep on performing itself through me.

THE *THEOGONY*

Original Greek consulted for my translation is from *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns, and Homerica,* translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1977.

With the Helikonian Muses let us begin our music.
They hold Mount Helikon, great and holy,
and dance on gentle feet about
its spring of violet water
and about the altar of Kronos' mighty son.
And they bathe their tender bodies in the Permessos
and in the Spring of the Horse and Holy Olmeios,
and dance their beautiful dances, most delightful,
with leaping feet at the summit of Mount Helikon.
From there they arise and, veiled in many vapors,
make their way by night, emitting most beautiful music
—

hymns to Zeus Aegis-holder and Lady Hera of Argos,
who walks on sandals of gold,
and the daughter of Zeus Aegis-holder, gray-green-eyed
Athena,
and Phoebos Apollo and Artemis, careful of arrows,
and Poseidon, Earth-holder, Earth-shaker,
and numinous Themis, and Aphrodite with helical
glances
and Hebe with the golden garland and beautiful Dione,
and Leto, Iapetos, and Kronos, crooked in counsel,
Eos and Helios, the great light, and Selene,
and Gaia and great Okeanos and black Night,
and the holy tribe of all the other immortals
whose being is always.
Once they taught Hesiod beautiful song
as he tended his lambs under holy Mount Helikon.
And this is what the goddesses first said to me,
those Olympian Muses, daughters of Zeus Aegis-holder.

“Wild shepherds, foul occasions for shame, monstrous
bellies:
we know how to tell many lies and make them sound
likely,
and we know, when we wish it,
how to sing things that are true.”
So said the sleek-tongued daughters of great Zeus.
And they gave me a scepter of laurel they plucked as it
blossomed,

and blew a singer's voice into my own
that I might sing things past and of the future,
and they bade me praise the gods who are forever
and always to sing of themselves at the start and the close.
But why all this about oak and stone?

So let us begin with the Muses.
They gladden the mind of great Zeus on Olympus
with their choral singing—all together—one sound.
The sweet tone flows from their indefatigable mouths.
The palace of loud thundering Zeus resounds with gaiety
at the goddesses' lily-like voices
as they broadcast their music around,
and the peak of snowy Olympus,
the home of the immortals, echoes to it.
And uttering thus their sweet ambrosial music,
they celebrate first and from the beginning
the holy race of the gods
whom Gaia and broad Ouranos bore,
and the gods who sprang from these,
bestowers of blessings.
Second they sing of Zeus,
father of gods and father of humans also,
when they begin to sing
and when they end their song—
how far superior he is in strength and stature
among the deities.
And singing last the lineage

of men and mighty Giants,
they please the mind of Zeus up on Olympus—
those Muses of Mount Helikon,
maiden daughters of Zeus who holds the aegis.

Mnemosyne,
who rules in the dells of Eleuther,
lay with the son of Kronos
and bore them in Pieria—
to foster forgetfulness of ills and respite from sorrow.
For nine nights running, wise Zeus
went up to her holy chamber

apart from the other immortals.
But when a year had ended and the seasons turned
and the months diminished
and many days were done,
she bore nine like-minded daughters,
and song was at home in their breasts,
and their spirits knew no care
except for their music,
and they dwelled but a short way away
from the snowy peaks of Olympus.
There they maintain handsome palaces
and gentle dancing places.
And Himeros and the Charities
dwell with them in delight
emitting lovely voices through their mouths,
and they utter legislation for everyone
and proclaim the solicitous customs of the immortals.

Then they ascend Olympus,
taking joy in their own sweet voices,
making ambrosial music,
and the black earth resounds
as they sing in celebration,
and the tapping of happy foot beats goes up from the ground.
Zeus holds court in the heavens
wielding the lightning and the gleaming thunderbolt,
for Zeus with his own mightiness
has conquered Father Kronos
and distributed proper prerogatives
to each of the immortals.

The Muses who dwell on Olympus
sing of such matters—
nine daughters of mighty Zeus, whose names are these:
Kleo and Euterpe, Thaleia and Melpomene,
Terpsichore, Erato, Polymnia,
Ourania, and Kalliope—
the latter the foremost of them
for she sings to kings.
And onto the tongues of Zeus-fostered princes
whom the daughters of Zeus choose to honor
bearing witness to their birth—
they pour sweet dew,
and honey-sweet eloquence flows
from such a prince's mouth,
and all the people look to him

as he delivers his judgments with true justice.
He settles disputes with pronouncements of great
competence.
Thus it comes to be
that there exist wise princes.
When the people are deceived in their assemblies,
he turns matters around
putting things in order
with gentle oratory.
And when he attends the assembly,
people seek his favor
as if he were a god
and the people address their prince
with sweet solicitations.

Such is the sacred gift of the Muses to men.
And it is
from the Muses
and Apollo-who-shoots-from-afar
that there are zither players and poet-singers
upon the earth,
but princes are from Zeus.
Happy is he whom the Muses cherish;
a sweet voice flows from his mouth.
And if one suffers from exigent anxieties
living in fear, one's heart in agitation,
if a poet-singer, servant-of-the-muses
celebrates in song
the famous deeds of former men
and sings of the blessèd gods who hold Olympus,

one forgets one's miseries immediately,
cares no longer occupy the mind,
the gifts of the goddesses so speedily distract one.
Greetings, daughters of Zeus—grant *me* sweet song;
celebrate the immortals, the holy tribe of those who are
forever—

those who were born from Earth and starry Heaven,
those born from dark Night
and whom the salt sea fostered.
Say how first the Earth
and the gods came into being,
and the rivers and limitless sea with its rushing swell;
and the shining stars and broad Heaven above;
and the gods who were born of *them*, givers of good
things.
Say how they divided their wealth and distributed
prerogatives,
and how first they came to possess Mount Olympus
with its many cloves and valleys.
Tell me about these things and from the beginning,
O Muses who dwell on Olympus,
and tell me which of them
first came to be.

The very first thing that came into being
was a "gap" called Xaos;
but then broad-breasted Earth,
the steady seat of everything,
and with it misty Tartaros

in the deep recesses
        of the wide-pathed terrestrial underground;
and Eros, fairest of deities,
who looses the limbs of every god and mortal,
who tamps down the mind in their breasts
and conquers deliberate intentions.
From Xaos came Erebos and black Night;
from Night, Aither and Day,
whom Night bore having mingled in love with Erebos.
And Gaia generated starry Ouranos, equal to herself,
so that he covered her on all sides,
to be a steady seat for the blessèd gods.
And she brought forth long mountains
and graceful gullies
for the goddess nymphs
who dwell in mountain glens.
And she bore the desert sea with its rushing swells,
Pontos, without sweet union of love.
Then bedding down with Ouranos,
she bore deep-swirling Okeanos,
Koios and Krios and Hyperion,
Iapetos, Theia, and Rhea,
and Mnemosyne and Themis
and Phoibe with the gold crown and lovely Tethys.
And then came Kronos, crooked in counsel,
the youngest and most uncanny of Earth's children,
and he hated the power of his father.

And she brought forth the Cyclopês—
overbearing beings:

Brontês and Steropês and Argês, the mighty hearted.
It was they that gave Zeus the thunder
and fashioned the thunderstone.
They were like gods in every respect
except that they had but one eye
in the center of the forehead.
They were named with the surname Cyclopês
because of their one round eye
set in the center of the forehead.
Strength and vitality and craft qualified their performances.
Gaia and Ouranos brought forth three other progeny:
Kottos and Briareos and Gyes, exorbitant productions!
Enormous and mighty—impossible to describe them properly.
One hundred unapproachable brachiations
sprang from the shoulders of each of them;
and fifty heads shot up from those shoulders also
over such stout limbs—
irresistible and stubborn strength,
in forms enormous.
These were the most uncanny of the children
Gaia and Ouranos together engendered.
They were hated from the beginning
by their own sire.
As soon as each was born,
he stuffed each one away
and kept him out of the light
in a hiding place inside of Gaia's body,
and Ouranos took delight

in his own egregious performances.
Vast Gaia groaned
because no further room
was in her,
and she pondered a ruse,
that was both wicked and cunning.
She invented gray adamant—flint—
and out of it fashioned a sickle
and informed the children
of her intent
and told them to take courage,
though her own heart was troubled.

“O Children, born to me
and to a miscreant of a father,
we shall exact due payment, if you obey me,
for your father’s outrage.
It was he who first conceived these
egregious performances.”

So she spoke, but fear seized all of them;
not one uttered a thing;
till Kronos, crooked in counsel, *did* take courage
and responded in words to his mother:

“Mother, I undertake
to accomplish the work,
since I do not honor this infamous father of ours.
It was he who first conceived these
egregious performances.”

So he spoke, and vast Earth was very happy in her heart.
She sat him down
hidden in an ambuscade,
and put in his hands that weapon with jagged teeth
and disclosed the strategem.

Great Ouranos came on
bringing the Night
and stretching himself
out along Gaia
for he longed to make love.
His son extended his left hand out of the hiding place
and took the long scythe
with the jagged teeth
in his right hand
and by no means did the monstrous instrument strike in vain.
He lopped off his own father's genitals with alacrity
and cast them behind him to be carried away.
Gaia received as semen
the blood that spurted forth.
And as the seasons turned,
she bore the Erinys,
and the Giants with shining armor,
holding long javelins in their hands,
and the nymphs called the Meliae
all over the limitless earth.
When the genitals were severed with the adamant
and thrown from the shore into the surging sea,

they were carried over the water for some distance,
and a white foam formed
about the immortal flesh
and a maiden grew within it.
At first she floated toward Kythera;
then to sea-girt Cyprus.
And it was not just some girl
who happened to come forth—
but an awesome, lovely goddess.
And grass sprang up about her supple feet.
Gods and men call her Aphrodite—
the goddess born from the foam—
and richly garlanded Kytherian,
because she came to Kythera;
and Cyprogenea, because she was born on Cyprus
with its many ocean swells,
but also Genital-Loving,
because she herself came to be
out of the god's genitalia.
And Eros attended her birth, and lovely Himeros,
and from the first *she*
attended the tribal counsel of the gods.
She has the following honors from the beginning,
the portion meted out to her
among the gods and the mortals:
the laughter of housewives and maidens,
wiles and sweet desire,
and gentle love.

But the other offspring

whom Ouranos the Mighty had sired—
Ouranos called them Titans in reproach;
namely, those who *strain.*
For he said that they had strained
to perform a wreckless enormity
for which they would pay by and by.

And Night bore hateful Destiny and black Fate
and Death and Sleep and the tribe of dreams.
And as a second brood, the goddess murky Night
gave birth to Blame and painful Woe,
though she slept with no one,
and also the Hesperides who care
for the beautiful golden apples
and fruit-bearing trees far away
beyond the glorious stream of Okeanos
that flows both ways.

And she bore the Destinies and the cruel-avenging Fates:
Klotho and Lachesis and Atropos
who assign to mortals at birth
good or ill.
They pursue the transgressions of men and gods,
nor do these goddesses relent from their uncanny anger,
until they've doled out cruel judgment
on whomever has missed the mark.
And grievous Night gave birth to Nemesis,
an affliction to mortals,

and Friendship and Deceit and terrible Old Age
and powerfully energized Strife.

But hateful Strife bore tormenting Toil,
Forgetfulness and Famine and weeping Sorrows,
Combats and Battles, Manslaughters and Murders,
Quarrels, False Words and Disputes,
Lawlessness and Ruin
compounded of one another,
and Oath which brings grief
to persons on earth
when someone willingly swears a false one.

But Pontos, the sea, sired true Nereus
who does not speak falsely,
the oldest of his children.
And they call him the Old One
because he can be trusted and is kindly
and slights not customary usage
but just and gentle thoughts are on his mind.
And Pontos, merging with Gaia,
sired great Thaumas and Phorkys the Proud One
and fair-cheeked Keto
and Eurybia whose heart is steel.

Nereus and rich-haired Doris, daughter of Okeanos,
the ultimate river,
gave rise to offspring among the goddesses
surpassing in loveliness:
Ploto and Eukrante, Sao, Amphitrite,

Eudore and Thetis and Galene, Glauke, Kumothoe,
Speio and Thoe and lovely Halie,
Pasithee, and Erato, and rosy-armed Eunike
and graceful Melite, and Eulimene and Agaue,
Doto and Proto, and Pherousa, Dunamene, Nysaie,
and also Aktaie and Protomodeia,
Doris and Panopeia and Galateia fair of form,
lovely Hippothoe and rosy-armed Hipponoe
and Kumodoke—
she with Kumotolege and Amphitrite
easily quiets
waves on the misty sea,
and blasts of the blustering winds; Kumo and Hione
and Halimede with the beautiful crown;
Glaukonome and Philommeides and Pontoreia;
Leagore and also Euagore and Laomedeia;
and Euarne with lovely shape and spotless form
and Psamathe of graceful figure,
Neso and Pronoe and Nemertes,
the latter who possessed the mind
of her immortal father.
All these were sired by blameless Nereus—fifty daughters,
skilled in flawless craftworks.

Thaumas wed Elektra—
the daughter of deep-flowing Okeanos.
She bore swift Iris and the long-haired harpies:
Aello and Okupete. On swift wings
they follow

the breath of the wind and the birds
for they scoot along
with time itself.
And Keto bore the Graiae to Phorkys:
these had beautiful cheeks
but were otherwise gray from birth;
therefore immortal gods
and men who dwell on earth
call them Graiae, the gray ones:
Pemphredo with the beautiful robe
and Enyo with the crocus robe.
And Keto also bore the Gorgons
who live beyond Okeanos
toward the extremity of Night
where the clear-voiced Hesperides dwell:
Stheno and Euryale and Medousa who
suffered a wretched destiny.
She was mortal, while the other two
were ageless and immortal.
The dark-haired god Poseidon lay with her
in a gentle meadow amid spring flowers.
When Perseus cut off her head,
Great Chrysaor and Pegasus sprang out.
The latter has that name because he was born
near the root-springs (pegae) of Okeanos,
while the former came into being,
a golden blade in his hands.
Pegasus flew up from the earth, mother of flocks,
and galloped straight to the immortals.

He lives in the palace of wise Zeus
and brings him thunderbolt and lightning.
Chrysaor sired the three-headed Geryons
having mated with Kallirhoe, daughter of Okeanos.
Mighty Herakles slew him
in sea-girt Erutheia
beside the shambling cows
on the day when he drove
the wide-browed oxen
to Tiryns
and crossed the ford of Okeanos
and killed Orthion and the herdsman Erytion
in his gloomy hovel out *beyond* Okeanos.

And Medousa bore another ungovernable prodigy
like neither mortal men nor like the immortals
in her hollow cave:
ferocious goddess Echidna:
one half nymph
with pretty cheeks
and glancing eyes,
one half a monstrous snake, uncanny and enormous,
wriggling, numinous, cannibal,
under the hidden places of the earth.
There she keeps her cave in a hollow rock
far from the immortal gods and far from humans.
There the gods gave her a glorious palace to dwell in.

She stands guard underground in Arima—Bitter Echidna,

immortal nymph and ageless for all her days.

They say that that maiden with glancing eyes
commingled with Typhon the violent, the criminal, the
uncanny.
And she conceived and bore him ferocious offspring.
First she gave birth to Orthios, the dog of the Geryones;
then she gave birth again—
to the ungovernable man-eating Kerberos,
impossible to speak of him:
he is the hound of Hades
with fifty heads and a voice of bronze
shameless and mighty.
Third she bore the Lernean Hydra, learned in
wretchedness
whom the goddess white-armed Hera fostered
brimming over with rage at mighty Herakles.
Herakles, son of Zeus, of the House of Amphitryon,
together with war-loving Iolaos,
slew Hydra with his pitiless bronze
in accord with the plan of Athena-
who-makes-off-with-the-spoils.
Hydra gave birth to Chimaira, breather of raging fire,
uncanny and huge and mighty and swift of foot.
She had three heads: one of a big-eyed lion,
one of a she-goat,
one of a snake—a mighty dragon:
The lion head foremost, the dragon in the back,
she-goat middens,

breathing forth uncanny strong blazing fire.
Pegasus and noble Bellerophon slew Chimaira.

And Echidna bore the murderous Sphinx—
murderous, that is to the Cadmeans—
in amorous subduction to Orthos.
And she spawned as well the Nemeian Lion
whom Hera, true bedmate to Zeus, reared to roam
the Nemeian hills, a bane to people.
But he preyed on the tribes of *her* people:
he lorded it over Tretos of Nemeia and over Apesas,
but the strength of Herakles eventually subdued him.

Keto commingled in love with Phorkys
and bore her youngest
in the form of an uncanny snake
who guards all-golden apples hidden away
in the dark recesses of earth's great extremities.
Such is the progeny of Keto and Phorkys.

Tethys bore eddying rivers to Okeanos:
Neilos and Alpheios and deep-swirling Eridanos;
the Strymon, the Meander, the fair-flowing Isther;
Phasis and Rhesos and silver-churning Achelôios;
the Nessos and the Rhodios, the Holiakmon, the Heptaporos; the Grenikos, divine Aisepos, the Simoïs,
the Pereios, the Hermos, and the fair-flowing Karikos;
greath Saggarios, the Lados, and the Parthenos
and the Euenos and the Adreskos
and the divine Skamander.

And Tethys also bore a holy brood of daughters
whom with Lord Apollo and the rivers
have charge of a band of youths upon the earth.
They keep this charge from Zeus:
Peitho and Admete, Ianthe and Elektre,
Doris and Prumno and godlike Ourania;
Hippos and Klymene and Rhodeia and Kallirhoe,
Zeuxo and Klutïe and Iduia and Pasithoe,
Plyxaure and Galaxaure and lovely Dione,
Melobosis and Thoe and Polydore of comely form,
Kerkeïs and Plouto of delightful figure and Boöpis,
Perseïs and Ioneira and Akaste and Zanthe,
Petraie the desirable and Menestho and Europe
and Metis and Euronome and Telesto with the crocus robe
and Chryseïs and Asïe and delectable Kalypso,
Eudore and Tyche and Amphiro Okuroe
and Styx, the foremost of them all.
These are the daughters that sprang from Okeanos and
Tethys,
but there are many others as well
three thousand trim-ankled
daughters of Okeanos
distributed everywhere, conforming to the earth
and conforming to the bodies of deep water,
offspring radiant among goddesses.
There are so many other rivers, resounding as they flow,
sons of Okeanos, whom Lady Tethys bore,

that it is difficult for a mortal to tell the names of them all,
but people know the ones by which they dwell.

And Theia, subdued in love with Hyperion,
gave birth to great Helios and Selene and Eos, the dawn,
who illumines all who dwell on the earth
and the immortal gods who hold broad heaven.
Eurybïe with Krio commingled in love, bore great Astraios
and Pallas and Perses, the latter preeminent among men
in understanding.

Eos the dawn bore the strong-hearted winds to Astraios:
Zephyros and Boreas, swift on his path,
and Notos,
a goddess with a god bedding down in love.
Then Erigeneia, the early born dawn,
bore the star Hesperus, the dawn-bringer
and the shining stars with which heaven is crowned.

The daughter of Okeanos, Styx, having mixed with Pallas,
bore Zelos, Jealousy, and Nike—Victory with beautiful ankles
in the halls.
And Strength gave birth to Force, distinguished offspring.

These have no residence away from Zeus, nor any seat of

honor

nor any path but that

on which the god conducts them,

but they always keep their seat

beside deep-thundering Zeus,

for thus did Styx, the Imperishable Okeaneid, plan

on the day when the Olympian

summoned the immortals to Olympus,

and said that whomever of them

would do battle along with him

against the Titans—

he would not dislodge from extant prerogatives

but that each would keep the honor held before

among the blessèd gods;

and he said that whoever enjoyed

no special privilege from Kronos

would receive prerogative and honor as is just.

First imperishable Styx came to Olympus with her children

through the counsel of their father.

Zeus honored her and gave her unsurpassable gifts.

He established her as the great oath of the gods

and that her children should live with him

for all their days.

And he fulfilled the promises he made to all,

but he himself ruled mightily and was still the lord.

Phoibe came to the longed-for couch of Koios.

Goddess-with-god gave birth to dark-robed Leto, ever
gentle,
conceived in love,
kind to humans and to immortal deities,
gentle from the beginning,
most amenable goddess on Olympus.
She bore Asterïe, happy in name,
whom Perses took to his house to be called his wife.
And she conceived and gave birth to Hekate, whom
Kronion Zeus honors more than anyone.
He gave her splendid gifts: to have a portion of the earth
and the desert sea.
And she was apportioned honor in starry heaven
and is particularly
held in reverence
among the immortal gods.
For even now when anyone on earth
prays and makes a handsome offering
he calls on Hekate.
Accolades liberally accrue to him
whose supplications the goddess favorably receives.
She bestows prosperity upon him
since the power to do so is with her.
She has her portion among all who were born
to Gaia and Okeanos,
nor did the son of Kronos ever use force upon her
or take away such prerogatives as she received
among the former Titan gods
but she holds them still

just as was the division at first from the beginning:
dignity on earth, in heaven, and on the sea.
Nor because she's an only daughter
did the goddess receive any honors the less
but's honored all the more
since it is Zeus himself that honors her.
Hekate greatly profits whomever she wishes;
she sits besides princes as they sit in judgment;
she causes her favorites to be distinguished
in the people's assembly;
and when men are rushing off to man-ravaging war,
the goddess is at hand
to tender victory and glory
to whomever she will.
It's a good thing to have her on your side
in games and competitions;
the goddess is at hand here too
to those whom she would profit;
by his strength and by his force
victory belongs to him,
and he carries off the prize
with grace and ease
and praise accrues as well to those who bore him.
And it's good—if she stands by a horseman—
whichever one she wishes.
To those who work the stormy gleaming sea,
who pray to Hekate and the loud-stomping Earth-shaker,
the illustrious deity easily
grants magnificent catches

and with equal ease
takes away again—
if in her heart she wishes it—
that which has appeared.
And Hekate's is blessing in the farmstead
along with Hermes' blessing
for causing livestock to multiply;
herds of cattle and flocks of woolly sheep
and ample goat herds—
she causes a few to multiply
and a multitude to diminish
if she wishes *that* in her heart.
Even though she is the only offspring of her mother,
she's singled out for honor
among all the old immortal gods.
And the son of Kronos makes her
a nourisher of youths who
after that day
saw with their own eyes
all-seeing dawn light—
so from the beginning—a nurse of the young.
Such are her prerogatives.

Rhea, ravaged by Kronos, bore illustrious children:
Hestía and Démeter and Hêra, with golden sandals;
strong Hades, who dwells in a palace beneath the earth
and has a pitiless heart;
and the loud-stomping Earth-shaker and sagacious Zeus,

father of gods and men, by whose thunder
the wide earth is agitated.
And great Kronos swallowed down all these,
as each one, just out of the womb,
came to their mother's knees;
he did it with this intent:
that none of the proud Ouranians
should ever enjoy the honors of a king;
for he learned from Gaia and Ouranos
that he himself in time would be overcome
by one of these children,
his strength notwithstanding,
through the machinations of Zeus;
nor did Kronos keep a blind lookout,
but he swallowed down his children as they appeared.
Relentless grief wracked Rhea.
But when Zeus, the father of gods and men,
was about to come out of her womb,
she begged her own dear parents,
Gaia and starry Ouranos,
to find a stratagem
so that her dear child might be hidden when born
and that an avenging spirit might take payment
from their father for her children
whom Kronos, crooked in counsel, had swallowed down.
Ouranos and Gaia heard their daughter and told her
what was destined to transpire
regarding King Kronos and his stout-hearted son.
They sent Rhea to Lyktos

in the rich country of Crete
when the youngest of her children, great Zeus,
was about to be born.
Gaia received him in wide Crete
to nurture and to rear. Gaia came first to Lyktos,
transporting him swiftly through black Night.
She took him up in her hands
and hid him in a cave,
under the secret places of the earth
on Mount Aigaion
covered with woods,
and she put a big stone
wrapped in swaddling blankets
into the hands of the great lord, son of Ouranos.
He took hold of it and stuffed it into his belly—
the wretch! He had no idea in his heart
that his son was left behind
unconquered and unmolested
in place of the stone
and that that son was soon to overcome him
and strip him of his prerogatives
by means of force and strength of hand
and that that son was soon to be
lord of the immortal gods.
Strong and gleaming grew the limbs of Zeus apace;
and as the years rolled on, great Kronos crooked in counsel,
defeated by the tactics and the strength of his own child,
beguiled by the suggestions of Gaia many and deep,

coughed up his offspring,
and first of all vomited the stone,
which he had swallowed last;
and Zeus affixed it on the broad-pathed earth at Pytho
beneath the glens of Parnassos
to be a sign for posterity
and a marvel to mortals.
And he loosed from deadly chains
his father's Ouranian siblings
whom Kronos had bound in his thoughtlessness.
They remembered to return the favor in kind:
they gave him the thunder and the glistening thunderbolt
and the lightning,
which enormous Gaia had previously hidden away.
Relying on these things, he rules both mortals and immortals.

Iapetos wed Klymene in marriage,
Okeanos' trim-ankled daughter,
and they went up into the same bed.
She bore him Atlas, a mighty-minded son,
and gave birth to Menoitios, whose glory is exorbitant,
and Prometheus with shifting wiles
and Epimetheus, whose wits are scattered:
from the beginning Epimetheus made mischief
for men who eat barley;
for he was the first to accept from Zeus
the virgin woman he'd fashioned.
And wide-watching Zeus sent Menoitios into Erebos,

hurling his smoking thunderstone
on account of his recklessness
and also his proud insolence.
Atlas holds broad heaven on his head
and on his unwearying shoulders.
Constrained by powerful necessity,
he stands at the extremities of the earth,
near the clear-voiced Hesperides.
Such is the allotment wise Zeus
distributed to him.
And he bound Prometheus, whose contrivances are various,
with inextricable, tormenting shackles,
and drove a shaft through the middle of him;
and upon him he set a long-winged eagle
who made a meal of his immortal liver,
and as much as the eagle
devoured by day
by night grew back again.
Eventually Herakles, Alkmene's mighty son, slew that eagle,
released the scion of Iapetos
from his dire affliction,
and ended his misfortune;
but not without the concurrence
of Olympian Zeus
who lords it from on high
that the fame of Theban Herakles
might wax even greater than formerly
over the earth that nourishes many.

Minding these things, Zeus honored his distinguished son.
He put an end to his wrath, in spite of the anger lingering
from that occasion when
Prometheus contended with cunning against the Kronion,
admittedly more mighty brute-strength-wise.
When gods and mortal men
disputed at Mekone,
Prometheus cut up a great ox
and placed it before them,
intending to deceive the mind of Zeus.
He set the flesh and innards, rich with fat,
before the others on the ox skin
and covered them over with the ox's belly;
but he put in front of Zeus white ox bones only
(though covered also with gleaming fat),
arranged with subtle craft.
And the father of gods and men said to him:

"Son of Iapetos, most distinguished of all the lords,
my good sir, how unequally you have meted out the
portions."

So spoke Zeus, whose wisdom is indefeasible, to rebuke him.
And Prometheus, crooked in counsel, responded,
not forgetting the ruse:

"Zeus, most glorious and greatest of the gods

whose coming into being is forever,
take whatever portion
the heart in your breast instructs you."

So he spoke, still nurturing his stratagem.
But Zeus, whose wisdom is unsurpassable, saw it,
nor did he fail to understand the ruse,
and in his heart contrived an act
to the detriment of mortal humans
that would indeed be accomplished.
He took the white fat up in his hands.
He raged in his breast
and wrath came over his spirit
because he saw the white bones
and through them the ruse that produced them.
For this reason the tribes of men
incinerate white bones to the immortals
on fragrant altars.
And Zeus who gathers the clouds
said to Prometheus in great agitation:

"Son of Iapetos, studied in cunning beyond all other beings,
it seems to me, good sir, that you have not abandoned
your wily tactic!"
So spoke Zeus, whose sagacity is unsurpassable, in anger.
He refused to discount the ruse
and denied unquenchable fire (to slight Prometheus)
to the race of mortal men born from ashes

who dwell on earth.
But the excellent son of Iapetos fooled him again:
he stole the *gleam*
of fire,
visible from afar,
and hid it in a fennel stalk.
And this gashed loud-thundering Zeus
to the bottom of his spirit.
His heart fumed
when he saw the gleam of fire
visible from afar,
gleaming among the humans.
And now he set an entity in action
that would in her own right
prove a bane to humans,
their acquisition of fire from Prometheus notwithstanding.
The famous limping deity Hephaistos
composed out of earth a shy maiden
according to instructions from the Kronion.
And the goddess gray-green-eyed Athena
gave her a maiden's girdle
and decked her out in silver raiment
and hung a veil from her brow
intricately embroidered
and a wonder to behold.
And Pallas Athena placed *about* her head
a garland of flowers
from fresh-grown herbs;
And placed *above* her head a golden crown

that limping Hephaistos
crafted with his own hands
as a favor to Father Zeus.
He wrought upon it many curious devices:
ferocious beasts that land and ocean nurture,
—and this is the most amazing
of the many things he created—
simulacra of living beings including their voices—
and from that coronet great beauty glowed.
But when the god completed that thing of egregious
beauty
as price for the blessing of fire,
he led her out for mortal men
and the other gods to gaze at
so that delighting both in her and her accouterments
with which the gray-
green-eyed daughter
of a mighty sire
had fitted her out—
wonder took hold of gods
and mortal men alike
as they ogled this thing of sheer witchery, irresistable
to men.
The genus of woman as such descends from this creature:
to the mortal males they live with, a great vexation
of no assistance at all in grinding poverty,
helpmeets in prosperity only;
as bees in thatch-roofed hives
feed drones by nature miscreant—

the other bees all day until sundown
are busy about the white wax combs
while the drones stay inside in the hive
parasitic on the labor of others,
so Zeus made women by nature
to exhibit a propensity for waywardness,
a bane to the tribe of male mortals.

And Zeus arranged another unhappy circumstance
in return for the good thing that was fire:
If a man should manage to flee marriage
and the troublesome proximity of women,
he arrives at death-dealing old age
with no one to take care of him.
Though a man of property when living,
his kinsmen will divide
his belongings when he's gone.
And to the man whose portion it is to *be* wed,
who takes a noble wife
suited to his disposition,
unfortunate further circumstances of life might
still accrue from good fortune:
obstreperous offspring
ever to vex one's spirit—
unconsolable misery.

Thus one can see
that it is not possible
to cheat or go beyond the mind of Zeus,

for not even the son of Iapetos, indefatigable Prometheus,
evaded the weight of his anger,
but by necessary force, great chains bound him,
in spite of his cunning.

When their father, Ouranos,
first raged in his heart at Obriareos
at Kottos and at Gyes,
he bound them in strong chains,
being envious of their insolent manhood,
their comeliness, their great size.
He confined them under the wide-pathed earth.
There they suffered dwelling
at the *ends* of the earth,
at the distant boundaries of Gaia,
in bitter anguish,
for a long time,
with great pain at heart.
But the son of Kronos and the other immortal
deities whom fair-haired Rhea bore in love to Kronos,
according to the counsels of Gaia,
lead them up again into the light.
For Gaia informed them of everything and in detail,
and how with her tactics they'd gain victory
and have cause for glorious vaunting.

Now the Titan gods and those who'd been born to Kronos
had long been fighting with heart-grieving toil

against one another in mighty combat—
the lordly Titans quartered on high Mount Othrys,
and fighting from Olympus, the gods, givers of good things,
whom fair-haired Rhea bore
having bedded down with Kronos.

For a full ten years they engaged in continuous combat
harboring heart-grieving hatred against each other,
and no end to the bitter strife
nor culmination came
for either side
but prospect of favorable outcome
stretched equally between them.
But when Zeus had provided Obriareos, Kottos, and Gyes
With everything appropriate; in particular,
nectar and ambrosia,
such nourishment as the gods consume,
a lordly spirit waxed in the breast of each;
and as they supped on nectar and ambrosia,
delicious fare,
the father of gods and men
spoke to them:

“Hear me, O radiant children
of Ouranos and Gaia
that I might speak as the heart in my breast commands.
For a long time those Titans and

we deities sired by Kronos
have striven against each other
for victory and sovereign rule.
Now you must apply
the great force that is in you
with invincible determination
in bitter strife against the Titans.
Remember the kindness of our friendship,
and from what miseries you've
come back into the light
released from cruel bondage
under misty gloom
because of our stratagems."

So he spoke.
Blameless Kottos responded:

"Divine one: you say things
of which we are not ignorant.
We are well aware of your capacity
for thought and understanding;
that you became the champion of the immortals
against a chill affliction.
It was indeed because of your stratagem that we're free
from inflexible shackles
back from misty gloom,
O Lord, son of Kronos,
though we'd not hoped for it.
Now with tenacious purpose

we'll supplement your power
in this most grievous conflict
and fight against the Titans
in mighty war."

So he spoke, and the gods approved
when they heard his speech,
and their spirit longed for war
even more than formerly,
and all, both male and female,
grew eager for dreaded battle that very day.
Titans and gods sprung from Kronos,
and those whom Zeus had
brought back from Erebos
up to the light
from under the earth—
those uncanny mighty ones—
possessed exorbitant vitality and power.
One hundred arms sprang from the shoulders of each of
them;
out from each shoulder fifty heads
on fifty stout limbs;
and they stood against the Titans in bitter combat,
holding enormous stones in their mighty hands.
And the Titans fortified their phalanxes,
and both sides made manifest their work
and the strength of their hands.
An uncanny uproar rang out
about the limitless sea

and the earth resounded egregiously;
broad heaven rattled and groaned;
blessèd Olympus was set in vibration
down to its foundations
under the charge of the immortals;
and ponderous quaking shook misty Tartaros
and the sheer rush of feet
and the whizzing of missiles;
thus they hurled their groaning shafts at one another.
And the voices of both armies reached starry heaven
as they shouted
and joined in battle with a great battle cry.
Zeus no longer held back his power
but now with breast full of fury
he manifested his mightiness entire.
From heaven and from Mount Olympus
he came forth shooting lightning flashes;
thunderstone and thunder
flew from his stout hand,
swirling the holy flame in rapid bursts;
life-sustaining earth in a tumult, burning;
the great woods crackled in unquenchable conflagration;
the whole earth seethed
and the streams of Okeanos and the desert sea;
thermal exhalations
lapped round the earthbound Titans;
unspeakable flame reached bright aether;
the exorbitant gleam of thunderstone and lightning
made them blind, and strength was no defense;

magic heat seized Xaos;
they seemed to see with their own eyes
and to hear with their ears
that Gaia and Ouranos had fused together
for such was the mighty din that went up
as if earth were falling to ruin
and high heaven were hurling her down;
such was the clamor of the gods come together in conflict.
And the winds caused an earthquake and a dust storm,
brought thunder and lightning
and the scintillating thunderstone,
which are the shafts of great Zeus,
and carried the uproar and the battle
cry into the midst of both armies
Excessive noise
rose from the terrible conflict;
mighty deeds were accomplished; the battle inclined
this way then that way.
And they fought each other without let
in violent war.
And these were on the frontlines on the gods' side:
Kottos and Briareos and Gyes, insatiable for war;
they launched three hundred stones from their stout hands,
and the missiles cast a shadow over the Titans
and sent them back down under
the broad-pathed earth
as far beneath the surface

as heaven is above it,
for such a distance below is misty Tartaros,
and they bound them in bitter chains
when at last they'd beat them
in spite of the Titans' superlative spirit.
It would take a bronze anvil nine days and nights
falling from heaven to reach the earth;
and it would take a bronze anvil nine days and nights
falling from earth to reach Tartaros on the tenth.
A bronze fence runs around Tartaros.
Night streams about it in three rows
like a necklace.
The roots of the desert sea and of the earth
grow above it.
And the gods hid the Titans away there
beneath the misty gloom
in a moldy locus
at enormous earth's extremities
according to the counsels of Zeus who gathers the clouds.
Poseidon put bronze gates to Tartaros
and a wall runs around it on every side.
Gyes and great-spirited Obriareos live there
as trusty gaolers of Zeus who holds the aegis.
Down there, all in order, are the sources
of dark earth and misty Tartaros
and of the desert sea and the starry heavens
and the limiting boundaries of them, grim and dank.
Even the gods find it loathesome:
a great chasm so huge

that were one within its gates
one would not reach the bottom
in a year of descending
but wind squall after cruel wind squall
would buffet one this way and that—
the monstrosity of it, uncanny
even to gods.
And the awesome palace of murky Night goes up there
covered with dark cloud.
Before that palace Atlas, Iapetos' child,
holds up the wide sky
with his indefatigable hands
and with his head
and *never* shrugs.
At the point where Day and Night
greet each other
and exchange positions
at the great bronze threshold—
the one goes down and in
when the other comes out the gate,
and the palace never shuts them
at the same time, inside it,
but one is always out of it
arching over the earth
while the other is within
and waits for the time of its journey
until it should come out again,
the one holding light
that makes much visible

to those down on earth,
the other holding Sleep in her arms,
the brother of Death,
deleterious Night,
veiled in vaporous clouds.
The children of dark menacing Night
have quarters down in there:
Hypnos and Thanatos
darkly numinous deities.
Resplendent Helios never
shines upon them with his beams,
neither when ascending heavenward,
nor going down from the sky.
And Sleep is at peace and meanders over the earth
and over the broad back of the sea, gentle to humans;
but Death's breast is made out of iron
and the heart in his chest
is like the pitiless bronze.
If he seizes a man, he keeps him,
and he is a loathéd thing
even to the deathless gods.

And down there, at the front of the region,
stand the echoing halls of mighty Hades
god of the underground
and terrible Persephone.
A giant hound, fierce and pitiless, guards its entrance
and practices a vicious tactic:
he fawns with his tail and both ears on anyone entering,

but they'll not go out again,
for he seizes and devours
whomever is about to make an exit.

And down there there dwells another deity
hateful to the immortals:
the River Styx, daughter of Okeanos that flows both ways.
Far from the gods she lives in her famous palace
roofed by big rocks, propped up heavenward on all sides
with silver pillars.
Swift-footed Iris, the daughter of Thaumas, though not often, comes with a message over the broad back of the sea;
but whenever Strife and Conflict
arise among the immortals
or a being that dwells on Olympus prevaricates outragiously,
Zeus sends Iris to bring a great oath back
from even so vast a distance
in a golden vessel:
the famous Stygian water
that surges from a beetling crag.
Deep beneath the broad-pathed earth
a branch from the holy river Okeanos
flows through black Night;
a tenth part of this water is alloted to her.
Okeanos, flowing
in nine silver whorls
about the earth and about the broad back of the sea,

falls into the salty water,
but one tenth part flows from a rock,
a great bane to the gods.
Whoever of the gods that possess
the peaks of snowy Olympus
has sworn an oath but leaves it unfulfilled
must lie without breath until a year has passed
and never approach his repast
of nectar and ambrosia
but lie on a sick bed without spirit or voice
and a thick trance conceals him.
And when he has completed
that long year in his sickness,
a penalty still more onerous follows on that:
for nine years he is cut off from the gods whose being is
forever,
and he neither joins in their counsels nor in their feasts —
for a full nine years.
In the tenth year he joins once again
the assemblies of the immortals
who have Olympian palaces.
Such an oath did the gods establish that River
Styx—composed
of imperishable Ogygian water—
should signify;
and it shoots down through a treacherous place.
There, and all in due order,
are the sources and extremities

of dark earth and misty Tartaros, desert sea
and starry heavens,
so grim and dank,
that even the gods find them loathsome.

Down there are the glittering gates
and the threshold of bronze immoveable
of a metal native to itself
whose roots are continuous and well fitting.
Transcendent, the Titans live
away from all the gods
beyond even the gloom of Xaos.
But the famous allies of Zeus,
who causes clashing strife,
Kottos and Gyes,
have their palatial dwellings
at the foundations of Okeanos.
But the deep-beating Earth-shaker
made Briareos his son-in-law because he is comely:
he gave him Kymopolea, his daughter, to have as his wife.

Once Zeus had driven the Titans out of Heaven,
monstrous Gaia gave birth to her youngest child, Typhon,
in love with Tartaros through golden Aphrodite.
Strength was in his hands in all his undertakings,
and tireless were the feet of the mighty god;
a hundred snake heads grew from his shoulders,
he was an awesome dragon,

with dark flickering tongues,
and fire flashed from the eyes
beneath the brows
in his weirdly numinous heads,
and fire burned from all his heads
when he glared at you.
And from these uncanny snake heads
came uncanny voices
that uttered every sort of sound, unspeakable;
for sometimes they made speech noises
comprehensible to the gods,
sometimes the snorting of a loud-bellowing bull,
in proud ungovernable fury;
at times again a roar as from the heart
of an uninhibited lion,
at another time
sounds like whelps, astonishing to hear,
or he'd hiss so the mountains resounded.
And now a thing beyond remedy
would have happened on that day
and he'd have come to reign
over mortals and immortals
had the father of gods and men not been sharp to
perceive it:
Zeus thundered fierce and strong
and the earth around and broad heaven above
and the sea and the streams of Okeanos
and the Tartarean regions of earth
resounded fearfully.

Great Olympus shook
beneath the immortal feet
of the Lord as he rose
and earth groaned at it.
Heat took the violet sea
because of the thunder and lightning
and from the monstrous fire and the burning winds
and the flaming thunderbolts,
the whole earth and the sky and the ocean seethed
and long waves rushed along the beaches
at the charge of the immortals
and an unstoppable quaking arose.
Hades trembled in his lordship over the dead;
so too the Titans down in Tartaros with Kronos quaked
because of the interminable clamor
and the most fearsome strife.
Zeus, once he'd activated his energy
and taken his armaments in hand—thunder and lightning
and the gleaming thunderbolt—
sprang from Olympus and struck Typhon
and burned all the wondrous heads of the awesome monster.
And when Zeus had subdued him with his blows,
Typhon collapsed a crippled wreck
and the great earth groaned.
And flame poured out of Lord Typhon
shot through by the thunderbolt,
stricken in the dark
and rugged hollows of the mountain.

Much of great earth was scorched by the vapor
the way tin is melted by the craft of men
heated in well-pierced crucibles;
or the way that iron melts,
though iron is the hardest thing there is:
overcome in the hollows of the mountain by glowing fire,
it melts in the earth at the hands of Hephaistos.
Just so did the earth melt
through the blaze of the gleaming fire.
Zeus, raging in his spirit,
threw Typhon into broad Tartaros.
Out of Typhon flows the moist force of the winds,
except for Notus, the south wind, and Boreas, the north,
and Zephyr, the clear
wind of the west wind:

these winds come from the god
and are of great benefit to mortals;
but the others fall on the misty sea,
rather a great *hindrance* to mortals
blowing in vicious squalls,
some, according to the season,
scattering ships and killing sailors;
and there is no remedy for men
who meet these troubles on the sea.
Still other winds blow
over the endless, flourishing earth
ruining the comely projects

of men who exist on earth *below* the winds,
filling them with dust and cruel tumult.

Now, when the gods had finished their labors
and had brought to decision by force
their struggle for prerogatives with the Titans,
they urged wide-watching Olympian Zeus,
according to the prodings of Gaia,
to be their lord and king,
and so it was that he
distributed the prerogatives among them.

Zeus, now king of the gods, first made Metis his consort;
and she was the foremost in knowledge
among mortals and immortals.
But when she was soon to give birth
to the gray-green-eyed goddess Athena,
Zeus, according to the proddings
of Gaia and starry Ouranos,
deceived the intellect of Metis
with a ruse and with wheedling speech
and got her into his belly, as if it were a womb.
For they advised that otherwise another
would come to hold the prerogatives of kingship
over the gods whose
coming-into-being-is-forever
in place of Zeus;
for very wise children were destined to come into being
out of this Metis:

first the maiden, gray-green-eyed Tritogeneia,
her father's equal in energy and intellect;
next however she would give birth to a son
with an overbearing spirit—a king of gods and men;
but Zeus, before *that* should occur,
put Metis into his belly
so that the goddess might conceive
only what was in *his* interest
both for good and for ill.

After Metis he led into marriage gleaming Themis,
who gave birth to the Horae (the Hours),
Eunomia, (Good Order), Dikê,
and Eirene (Flourishing Peace).
These supervise the activities of mortal humans.
And also she bore the Moirai,
Klotho, Lachesis, and Atropos,
to whom wise Zeus delivered the highest honors:
for they grant mortal humans
to possess both good and ill.

And beautiful Eurynome, Okeanos' daughter,
bore the three fair-cheeked Graces:
Aglaia, Euphrosyne, and lovely Thaleia;
and love that looses the limbs flowed
from under their darting eyelids;
beautiful it is when they glance from under their brows.

And he came to the couch of Demeter, provider for many.

And Demeter gave birth to white-armed Persephone
whom Aidoneus rapt away from her mother,
for wise Zeus gave her to him.

Furthermore, Zeus loved Mnemosyne with the beautiful hair
from whom the nine Muses with golden crowns were born.
They take joy in festivals and the pleasures of song.

Leto, most desirable
of all the descendants sprung from Ouranos,
gave birth to Apollo and to Artemis, careful of arrows,
after she'd merged in love with Zeus Aegis-holder.

Lastly, he made Hera his flourishing bedmate,
and she gave birth to Hebe and Ares and Eileithuia,
having merged in love with the king of gods and men.

And Zeus himself gave birth from his own head
to Tritogeneia, the terrible instigator of conflicts,
the leader of armies, the indefatigable, the queen
who takes pleasure in tumults, in battles, in wars.
But Hera, without merging in love, produced Hephaistos,
most accomplished in crafts of all the Ouranian deities.
For Hera was angry and quarreled with her bedmate.
And on account of this quarrel she bore
without union of love with Zeus Aegis-holder
that illustrious son, Hephaistos, accomplished in craftwork

beyond all the Ouranians.
But Zeus lay with Tethys,
Okeanos' fair-cheeked daughter
apart from Hera,
deceiving Metis, in spite of her intelligence.
He bundled her up in his arms and got her into his belly
fearing she might give birth to an object
more mighty than his thunderbolt.
So the high-throned son of Kronos, who lives in the ether,
swallowed her suddenly.
But she just as suddenly conceived Pallas Athena
whom the father of gods and men
then bore from the crown of his head
by the banks of the River Trito.
Metis stayed hidden in the innards of Zeus,
the mother of Athena, fashioner of righteousness,
wiser than gods and mortals.
In there the goddess Athena received
that power, wielding which she exceeded
the strength of all the immortals
who have homes on Olympus:
Zeus gave birth to Athena
already donning the aegis,
fully decked out in armaments of war.

From Amphitrite and the deep-beating Earth-shaker,
great Triton was born,
whose force reaches far and wide.

Possessing the sea depths,
he dwells with his lordly father and dear mother
in a golden palace,
an uncanny deity.

And Kythereia bore to shield-piercer Ares
Panic and Terror, terrible beings,
who drive in confusion the thick ranks of men
in chilling war
in the spirit of Ares, sacker of cities,
and she also bore Harmonia,
whom high-spirited Cadmus made his wife.

And Maia, daughter of Atlas, bore to Zeus
illustrious Hermes, the herald of the immortals,
having gone up into his holy bed.
And Semele, daughter of Cadmus,
having merged with Zeus in love,
gave birth to a glorious son, happy Dionysos,
a mortal woman bearing an immortal:
now they both are gods.

And Alkmene bore mighty Herakles,
having comingled in love
with Zeus who gathers the clouds.
The famous lame god, Hephaistos, made Aglaia,
the youngest of the Graces, his flourishing wife.

And golden-haired Dionysos made Ariadne,
Minos' daughter, *his* flourishing wife,

and the son of Kronos made her
deathless and unaging to please him.
Mighty Herakles, courageous
son of trim-ankled Alcmene,
once he had accomplished his groaning labors,
made Hebe, the child of great Zeus and golden-sandaled
Hera,
his modest wife on snowy Olympus.
Happy, having finished his great work,
he lives untroubled and ageless among the immortals
for all his days.

Perseis, the daughter of Okeanos, bore to Helios,
Kirke and King Aietes.
Aietes, the son of Helios, who shines for mortals,
wed fair-cheeked Iduia, daughter of Okeanos, ultimate river. She bore him fair-ankled Medea,
conquered by him in love, through golden Aphrodite.
Farewell, now, you holders of Olympian houses,
you islands and mainlands and salty inland ocean.
Sing now of the tribe of the goddesses—
sweet-voiced Olympian Muses,
daughters of Zeus Aegis-holder,
immortals who made their beds with mortal men
and fostered offspring like the gods.

Demeter radiant goddess, gave birth to Ploutos,
having merged in sweet love with the hero Iasion
in a thrice-ploughed furrow in the rich district of Crete.

Ploutos is a kind god who travels everywhere
on earth
and over the broad back of the sea.
Whoever happens upon him and falls into his hands,
he establishes in riches and bestows great wealth upon him.

To Cadmus, Harmonia, the daughter
of golden Aphrodite,
bore Ino and Semele and fair-cheeked Agauve
and Autonoe whom long-haired Aristaios wed
and Polydoros as well,
all in rich-crowned Thebes.

Kallirhoe, Okeanos' daughter,
having merged in love through Aphrodite, ever-so golden,
with stout-hearted Chrysaor
gave birth to a child, the strongest of all humans,
Geryones,
whom mighty Herakles slew in sea-girt Erytheia.

Eos, the dawn, bore
Memnon with the bronze crest,
king of the Ethiopians, and Lord Hemathion.
And to Kephalos she delivered a splendid son,
strong Phaethon, a man resembling the gods.
When the full flower of glorious youth possessed him
and his were still but the thoughts of a child,
laughter-loving Aphrodite caught him up and took

him and made him a keeper of the night shrine
in her holy temple, a brilliant spirit.

The son of Aison,
according to the plan of the gods
whose coming into being is forever
led away the daughter of god-fostered King Aietes,
once he'd completed the many-groaning labors
that the overbearing presumptuous monarch King Pelias
imposed upon him.
The labors done, and with great effort,
the son of Aison came to Iolcos
in a swift ship
leading the glancing-eyed maiden
and made her his flourishing wife.
And she was a conquest of Iason, shepherd of the people,
and bore a child, Medeion,
and Cheiron, son of Phylira, reared him in the mountains,
and the plan of great Zeus was accomplished.

And one of the daughters of Nereus, the Old Man of the Sea,
Psamathe, radiant goddess, belovèd of Aiakos,
through golden Aphrodite, bore Phokos.
And the goddess Thetis
with the silver shoes
was a conquest of Peleus and gave birth
to lion-hearted Achilles,

who breaks the ranks of the foe.
And fair-crowned Kytherea gave birth to Aeneas,
having lain in sweet love with the hero Anchises
on the peaks of Mount Ida with its many woody glens.

Kirke, daughter of Helios, son of Hyperion,
in love with steady-minded Odysseus,
gave birth to Agrios and Latinos, faultless and mighty
and also Telegonos, through golden Aphrodite.
And they ruled over all the Tyrsenians,
very famous though very far away
in a hidden place among the holy islands.

And Kalypso, radiant goddess, bore to Odysseus
Naisithoos and Nausinoos, having lain with him in sweet love.

These are the immortals who went to bed,
goddesses with men,
and bore them godlike offspring.

Now sing of the tribe of women,
O sweet-voiced Olympian Muses,
daughters of Zeus Aegis-holder . . .

COMMENTARY ON THE *THEOGONY*

Making Gods, Making Worlds, Making Peoples, Making Poets

The title of Hesiod's poem means the "coming-into-being," "the generation," indeed "the birth" of the gods. But that birth also traces, for the Greeks of the classical and archaic ages, the establishment of the cosmic

and social order of things that obtain in their time. Historically, the *Theogony* itself was not born in a single moment. It evolved over many generations and gathered in its text an untold multitude of poetic performances. And yet, in a sense, the whole content of the poem came into being—indeed *comes* into being—each time the poem is performed, recited, translated, or read. Though the text trails along itself the many improvised events of its prehistory, the poem's audience, at each performance, became the primordial witness to the coming into being of the world through the poet's inspired participation in the Muses' song.

The Greek root *gen-* (from which our words *genesis, generate, generation, engender, gender, genus, and* generality all derive) has a central meaning of "becoming" as opposed, for instance, to "being." It is the root of the common word used to indicate birth or giving birth (*gignomai,* which in many of its forms takes "gen-" in its construction). A complex of rather divergent phenomena are gathered in advance in this root: to originate or begin and to be that which has been generated or engendered. It also encompasses the idea that time can be organized by generations, that anything comes from anything else, what we would think of as causality or successive order, as if one *generation* of phenomena *generated* the next, so that the succession of time looks like the succession of generations. *Genas in genus* and *generality* also means that which structures a logical sequence, that one idea follows from or entails another and that higher orders of generality include the orders beneath them. In sum, these words pertinent to logic, causality, and creative productivity have a common etymology that lies behind the scope and power of the *Theogony*. The poem deals with the coming into being of gods and worlds, with the sequence of generations, with the successive character of time itself, with causality, and with the logical order by which a more general concept contains or entails the lower-order concepts and individuals that fall under it.

The present of the text is the cosmogonic time of the mythic content, but for the Greeks this mythic time was continuous with their own. It was not off somewhere *in illo tempore*—an ahistorical mythic time.[*6] The *otherness* of the gods' world was palpable enough, but it interacted dramatically with the immediacy of this one. Hesiod's poem was the context in which the gods, the world, and the people came into their "being"—came into their identities. For the poet-singer, all this occurred in

an elevated, even trance-like state, in which he or she really *became* the poet-singer in the performance, and as such became the vehicle for the god. A single scene encloses the singing of the Muses, the identity of the poet-singer *as* poet-singer, the world as god inhabited, and the gods themselves —all sung into apparency by the poet and witnessed by the people as a community whose collective identity was felt to be continuous with the theogonic occurrences. The poem was what I call *onto-phano-poietic*:[†7] it brought to appearance the being of the world. How does this occur, that a poem might create deities, the world, and the being of the people—in the same event?

The Middle Voice

We are no doubt familiar with how English verbs are proxy for actions expressed either in the active or the passive voice, roughly approximating the difference between acts that one performs and those that happen to one. But there are actions where neither of these voices seem to apply. An action might not be the product of a person's willful agency and still not be something that passively happens to him or her as if through an impersonal chain of causes. Poetic inspiration is a case in point. A number of recent authors have discussed the middle voice where it proves useful in the analysis of natural and linguistic phenomena because neither active nor passive constructions seem adequate. I am thinking particularly of Marjolein Oele, who, in her *E-Co-Affectivity* (Oele 2020) provides numerous examples of such analyses.

The Greek and the hypothetical Proto-Indo-European language have, in addition to an active and a passive, a middle voice that, among other things, expresses the inspiration of the Muse and would be used wherever it seems that a god impels, instigates, induces, or inspires some action. The Homeric-Hesiodic dialect expresses the instigation of such action by saying that a god strikes the person in the *thumos*—an "organ" in the middle of one's body that is activated in this manner.[*8] If Eros strikes, one falls in love; if Mars, one is impelled to rage, violence, or courage in combat; if Hermes, deeds of mind, cognition, planning, cleverness—all the devious and ingenious devices of the Hermetic character. The consequence of being struck in the *thumos* by the god is clearly not the work of one's independent free will, but it is also not entirely a passive reaction to an external force.

The god is not entirely external to one's psyche, and yet he is external to it, *too!* (Look at the second fragment in the *Chaldaean Oracles* for an elaboration of this point.) Zeus might actively strike your house with his lightning bolt, but the striking of one's thumos is not quite like that. When Eros or Hermes touches this organ, it is the most intimate of phenomena. Often translators are forced to use such locutions as "love was awakened in his heart"—as if the response were passive. But it isn't passive. It is an arousal at the very root of one's powers of *action;* it is that which is not quite *you* but which activates what is active *in* you *as* you. The phenomenon is articulated in the middle voice.

Hesiod's invocation of the Muses in the opening line of his *Theogony* is a case in point. I give that line as: "With the Helikonian Muses let us begin our music." The Greek verb that I translate with "let us begin" is not, as in my English, active. The line in Greek is:

Mousaôn Helikôniadôn archômeth' aeidein.

Mousaôn Helikôniadôn is simply "With (or of) the Muses from (Mount) Helikon." The poem sings first of all *about* the Muses, but it is by means of the activation of the Muses' function that the singing in fact can begin. The verbs of the sentence *archômeth' aeidein* do say something like "let us begin to sing." *Archômeth*' is "let us begin," *aeidein* is the infinitive "to sing." *Archômeth*', however, is in the middle voice—first person plural of *archesthai*, "to cause to begin." It is based on *archê*, the *principle* of a thing (as in "archetype"): that which prescribes how something is to appear or behave—what, in fact, it is. An *archê* can also be a first event, a beginning.[*9] But the sense is that the principle of the thing is present in and is the reason of its beginning: how an action is initiated determines and/or shows what it is. *Archê* can mean "beginning" in the sense of principle of origin or simply making a start.

The poet, however, is neither inventing his tale nor passively receiving it from the Muses: *the content sung about (the Muses' singing) is coming into being through the principle (the arche) that is realized in the very line that invokes it*. But that principle is in fact the principle of creating an origin or making a beginning itself. This *origin-ing* occurs in the speech that describes it. And indeed the line is the first line of the poem. (*Muses* is even

the first *word* of the poem.) It *performs* its own beginning and establishes the general provenance of its content: the realm of the Muses and the coming into being of the gods. Everything in the poem will concern the realm of the gods, and the performance itself will be *infused* by the gods—for the Muses themselves are *among* the gods, and the poem includes in its theogony their own coming into being. "Which comes first, the poem, the poet, or the Muses?" would be the Hermeneut's conundrum. Beginning or origin? History or metaphysics?

The poem has already long been there (in the oral tradition) before any particular performance invokes its own initiation. But for the poet, initiating the singing of the *Theogony* is fraught with mysteries since it is a poem that in one sense never began or began in the immemorially distant past, anyway certainly not, in the later days of its being performed, within the particular bard's memory. It has "always" been there. But since it *sings into being* the beginning of everything and has its own origin each time out as if for the first time, for the poet to initiate the singing, he must enter into the poem's origin, and to do that he must enter something like a trance of possession and sing *for, of, and from* the Muses. For the Muses were there where their song "never began" but begins "now," in time immemorial, *this* time, *this* moment, when the gods are sung into their histories, and the poet and his audience with them.

The text is now, but when is that? Deep in the past? The real time of each performance? The mythical time of the event in its content? A symbolic past that prescribes the way things have become since that time? The present moment, thousands of years later, when, even now it is being read, by you or me, perhaps (as if) for the first time?

Under positive *figuration* of history, it seems we should be able to straighten these things out. The poem takes place within literature, which contextualizes the history of its composition (by the oral poets) and categorizes (as a theogony) the particular narrative content. We should be able to keep history and content in separate cognitive compartments. We would not have to confuse the two, except for the fact that they are essentially involved in each other and cannot so easily be disentangled. For the terms under which we grasp such a history are themselves historical; that is to say, history comes to its appearance through the terms of its depiction, but those terms are themselves within the orders of poetry, not

history. The Being of the Muses is called into Being in the poem, and the evidence for them *is* the poem. How do we know what the Muses do? We have this poem to show us. But the poem came into being, historically, through an itinerary that includes the many many voices involved in its composition, and yet they, in the poem, speak as if in one voice, singing alone, each time the *Theogony* is improvised, recited, translated, or privately perused. I fear that my attempt to untangle the threads of the poem's being just adds more threads to the tangle. Be that as it may, I must continue to draw out the threads.

Self-Reference

The first 115 lines of the poem are entirely about the Muses and their initiation of the poet. The poem itself is an event in the Muses' history and in the poet's as well. The first line of the poem is intricately self-referential. It speaks of the beginning of the poem and is itself that beginning. It speaks of the event in which the shepherd Hesiod became a poet. And it sings of the genealogy in which the Muses themselves are generated (from the coupling of Zeus and Mnemosyne).

The poet speaks as if the beginning of the poem were something yet to happen. "Let us begin," he says, as if to give the order to begin what has not yet begun. But with those words, the poem has *already* begun. His words *cause* to begin to appear that which is already under way. (See below in this section for a discussion of the "intransitive" character of this seemingly [or actually!] impossible relation.) The poem brings into language the content about which it sings, but its own performance *is* that content. It not only sings about itself, it *enacts* itself.

Though the poem is not passively happening to the poet, still, the principle of the poem, its *archê,* sets itself in motion. The poem enacts itself performatively: the line performs the very thing its words describe.[*10] The invocation of the Muses is a magical performance, in which the world depicted is brought into being. The poem makes its world come to appearance, and the essence of emergent apparency is *magic*.

Hermes presides over this middle-voiced, performative, intransitive, self-reflective, magical, poetic creation. It is his Genius that stimulates the very roots of inspiration. For the Muses blow a singer's voice into Hesiod; but the spirit of creative intelligence that is Mnemosyne, the mother of the

Muses, is configured most richly in Hermes. There are versions of this genealogy, not in Hesiod, where Hermes, not Zeus, actually fathers the Muses upon Mnemosyne. (Mnemosyne herself, in Hesiod, is born directly to Gaia, so one can understand that her provenance in any case is very old and that her daughters have powers that do not originate with Zeus.)

In an important book about Plato's *Republic* by Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato,* the author shows how in the Hellenic world, before literacy became common, the performance of a poem by the rhapsodes (the professional reciters of Homeric and Hesiodic poetry that succeeded the oral poets, as I mentioned above) so effectively conjured the content of the poems that it was as if an actual spectacle were being brought into being in front of the audience. It is no exaggeration to say that the performative recital of the poetry constituted a magical display, for the coming to appearance of a narrative, when the dualism of text and content had not yet articulated itself through general literacy, was an *emergent* phenomenon. If one doesn't have a text to read, the poem *is* what appears before one as one hears it performed. Its content is not internal to a text, it is not in the mind of the poet or audience. It is something happening out there. And for a Greek, the content was a history that directly led into one's own history, for the gods who come to being and then to power in the poem framed the world in which one lived.

The performed content of the poem emerges in(to) appearance and conditions the consciousness of the crowd. Not *as if* by magic but in fact magically. The audience is spellbound. Magic itself is the coming to appearance of phenomena. Subjective agency and objective emergence interfuse. That which was not in being an instant ago appears before our very eyes. Hocus-pocus. Presto chango. Shazam. But really—no tongue-in-cheek—the gods are here. Who are they? *What* are they?

Primordial Xaos

Once the role of the Muses has been elaborately activated, the *Theogony* begins in earnest with Earth in primordial darkness and proceeds to generate the present order of things (i.e., eighth century BCE). The primordial: that which has not yet spoken, a dark silence that will contextualize, underwrite, and support all phenomena but which, when

unattended to and unrecognized, mysteriously undermines and betrays the orderly noise of the civilized.

The Titanic epoch—the time between the emergence of Xaos and the generation of the Olympian gods—shows what was conquered by the Olympians and lost to the civilization that required that conquest for its own emergence: the exuberant, inexhaustible, spontaneous generation of novel forms of being; the confluence of heterogeneous ontological possibilities without rigid hegemony; immediate access to the ineffable background to all that comes to appearance; a primordial but divine ultimate that, once hegemony is in place, gets kicked upstairs. The god of the three magisterial monotheisms covers Being, and being remote and seriously other than his creatures, the ultimate principle of Being itself is made remote and only to be assessed through the mediations of a cosmically organized hierarchy. *Mutatis mutandis:* once the necessary changes have been made and the Olympian hegemony is established, it deeply influences the hierarchical cosmologies of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism and, beyond that, the modern world, which, with or without the gods, is organized hierarchically into cities, provinces, nation-states, and churches. For exoteric religions would force us to accept the remoteness of our own principle of being; and states—even democratic ones—appropriate our sovereign power to imagine and organize our world. As we shall see, the Hermetic initiations depicted in the *Corpus Hermeticum* seek to liberate us from all cosmic and, by implication, ecclesiastical and political hierarchies, restoring that which has been lost. *In the great oncoming we shall recover the sacred, unimpeachable universality and tastiness of the fecund silence beyond and behind the gods.*

Genealogy, Logic, Chance

Apart from Hesiod's poem, if you follow any cycle of Greek myths, you will become familiar with complex genealogical sequences: genealogies dotted with episodes, episodes interrupted to deliver the genealogies of its characters, generations crossed by the rhyming of similar narratives. I have a book that establishes the kinship linkages among some four thousand names culled from the surviving literature of Greek antiquity—and that without even including other persons involved in variant versions of myths, where a god has intercourse with gods or humans other than those in the most familiar mythological couplings.

The stringing together of narratives by generation teases the mind with all sorts of structures, patterns, inquiries. If Y is the daughter of X, there will be characteristics of X that Y inherits: heritability is transmission of characteristics over time. But time also brings consequences, not only transmissions: the occurrence of M is sine qua non for the subsequent occurrence N: causality. Curiously, the *Theogony* in its treatment of what exists before the Olympian victory, though showing *generativity,* does *not* show *heritability*. It is as if the unruly creativity of the pre-Olympian Earth generated forms spontaneously anew with each generation. It will only be with the Olympians that characteristic qualities will pass from father to son.

Be this as it may, genealogical consequences are not only the material effects of antecedent causes: kinship has *logical* properties, properties, for instance, that identify how a genus generally governs its member species. Nations, tribes, clans, families, individuals: a taxonomical tree of general categories organized as a logical hierarchy, any given level of the tree representing a more general category than, say, the genus below it. What to make of the skein of the *Theogony*'s entangled consanguinities, progenies, causations, narratives, transmissions, logical necessities?

In the expectation of logical entailment, genetic phenomena that do not follow logically appear as paradoxes, and the paradoxes of genealogy give rise to the deepest questionings about Being itself, as one can see from the excruciating tangles in the story of Oedipus. The natural order of things seems violated when prescribed kinship relations and their connected sexual mores are not observed. Oedipus marries his mother and kills his father, thus deranging the entire logic of identity that kinship is supposed to establish. He eliminates his own source in his father and becomes his own father by impregnating his mother. These matters are not merely logical curiosities. They are enigmas of Being, if one's being is understood as following from one's genetic lineage. Logic binds itself to genealogy and casts a spell over Being so that we feel kinship as coessential with "what is." Sexuality, causality, logical consequence. Desire, material connection, necessary entailment. The complex interlacing of these different kinds of sequences is an underlying feature of Hesiod's *Theogony,* behind the appearances of that which seems to be—desire, causality, logic. Even the gods are susceptible to them; even the poets are compelled to trace their complexities. Their very exhibition in the poem suggests an ontological anteriority—a sense that Being transcends the tangle but also warrants it.

Divinity itself is a mask of Being. But then history is such a mask as well. And causality. Even logic. For consider: *Are* there other impulsions besides desire behind the acts of gods and mortals? Can phenomena arise without causation? Does logic compel phenomena to conform to its rigor? *Incursions* from Being may take the form of *theophany* and yet know no law to organize desire, successivity, consistency. Law and lawlessness contextualize each other. Chance occurrences encode and actuate destiny.

Chance is not only lawless randomness. Probability *measures* chance and prescribes the rigid laws of statistical analysis, and the theory of algorithmic complexity is able to quantify degrees of randomness (Chaitin 2007). In chance as fortune, neither law nor its absence obtain. An incursive event may seem an arbitrary interruption, for its source would not be in evidence. Only one's response can characterize the incursion: loss of consciousness, rush of energy, somaticizations, a sense of the presence of demons, angels, gods, little people, sentient tubules, or buttons streaming in a river of microbial intentionalities permeating one's thought-flesh, extraterrestrials—in short, configurative, imaginal, *onto-phano-poietic* eruptions. *Imaginal* here means the active engagement of the mind in the production of images, to be distinguished from imaginary (i.e., unreal) and imaginative (i.e., making things up).[*11] The soul that experiences them waits upon the formulation of a symbol to express them or a doctrine to conceive of them.

A poet dreams: *An aged man in white linen rises before the mind. His eyes are crystals, his fingers electrodes, his words incantations but uttered in silence, his wind-disheveled ancient locks scintillate intricate filaments of white fire. "I am you," the old one whispers. "I am you," I echo from my sky.*

The Titans

Before the birth of the gods proper, there came into being only a yawning gap, the Greek word for which is *Xaos* (from which the English word *chaos* derives). Immediately after Xaos came Gaia, Earth, who, though a goddess, has no anthropomorphic form. She must have been simply a broad expanse with nothing above it but the open space of Xaos itself and an indistinct realm of darkness called Erebos, a region of Tartaros, the vast underworld

inside her. Nyx (Night) will couple with Erebos and produce a brood of grim negativities.

The word *Xaos* does not mean "chaos"; rather, it is something like the hollow cavity opened by a yawning gap. But this gap has nothing between which it might *extend* a gap. Gaia is the ground below a space with no sky above it. Space and Earth are just there together as a poorly defined potentiality for locatedness, waiting for beings to take place upon it.

What preceded Gaia and Xaos? Hesiod doesn't say. I am reminded of the hymn from the *Rig-Veda* that, attempting to trace existence back to its ultimate source, confesses that only the gods have knowledge of *that,* but perhaps even the gods "know it not" (Doniger 1981)! The mystery of Being itself might prove unresolvable even by mythology.

The first events in creation seem to suspend a sense of pure impendingness, a timeless waiting, timeless because the heavens—the cycling planets and stars that measure out time—have not yet come to be. Timeless also because even that which a later age will know as Father Time does not exist. Etymologists tell us that the name Kronos is not related to the Greek word *chronos,* meaning "time," but no Greek would recognize the distinction, and in fact Kronos the god will be treated in traditions based on the Greeks as Chronos, the Old One—the god of ageless time.

The Greek words for "coming into being," "being generated," "being originated," "being born," and "becoming" are intimately related, as we have seen.[*12] Having announced the coming into being of the first things, the Muses speak of how other conditions arise without further ado. Hesiod wants to get on with the business of *generating* the gods proper and will have nothing more to say about that ultimate origin, which later theologians, mythographers, and particularly philosophers will busy themselves. Parmenides will tell us that Being itself cannot have come into being at some point in time; Plato and the later Neoplatonists will be concerned with a principle of unity about which nothing further can be said; and Aristotle will know an "unmoved" mover. Aristotle's "unmoved mover" is his first principle. It occurs where he is explaining the origin of change, in Greek *kinesis*—usually translated as "motion" but covering all that changes. The origin of kinesis itself must have no further cause. Aristotle's ultimate principle is thus the "un-moved mover," the unchanging origin of change.

The rest of the *Theogony,* and indeed the Homeric poems as well, will hint at a sense of a divine principle anterior to the gods, but no explicit development of it is given in them.

Though the *Theogony* narrates the coming into being of the gods and the drama of how they came to possess Mount Olympus, the poem also implicitly traces the historical coming into being of the Olympian hierarchy as a cultural formation that, for the Greeks, stands for the advent of civilization itself. The Titans and the monster Typhon are *chthonic* deities—gods associated not with the heavens of the Olympians but with Earth and the underworld.

Pindar places Typhon as imprisoned under Mount Aetna in Sicily—still capable of spouting rivers of fire today when Aetna's volcano erupts.

Gaia stands behind all the maternal goddesses—Rhea, Demeter, Hera, Cybele—and recapitulates the Great Goddess of Old Europe. Gaia is both the matrix (mother principle) of fertility and the realm of the dead. Revered and propitiated in local cults and mythologems, the Titans represent that which had to be conquered, brought to heel, imprisoned, or forced to pay tribute to the dominant order before the organized cosmos and the civilized state could come to dominate existence. The Olympians, however, do not conquer the entities that preceded the Titans: Gaia herself, Okeanos, Ouranos, Night, and Eros. They are there as shadowy presences and will announce themselves when cracks in the Olympian edifice begin to open. Earth and sky, water, hunger, and night are not eliminated by the arrangements of the civilized.

Though the *Theogony* is clearly a poem within the classical Greek tradition, its preexistence as oral composition harks back to a previous time. It contains cultural features that can be traced to the Mycenaean Age as we mentioned, and it resonates values not imposed by Zeus and his celestially housed Olympians, values belonging primordially to the powers of Earth—a chthonic universe without hegemony, wildly prolific and fertile.

The poet Charles Olson appropriates Hesiod's description of Typhon in a poem of his that spells out an alternate vision of what precedes civilization (Olson 1968). Olson uses Hesiod to *celebrate* Typhon's snake heads, each one of which emits a unique sound, the whole monster being a polyphony of independently expressive sonorities. To read the *Theogony* might be to catch a glimpse of that which lies before but also even now lies

in back of a world that since the Greeks has imposed its orders upon both humanity and nature. For Olson, Hesiod, in expressing that which precedes the coming of the gods to Olympus—like Blake's Milton, who was "of the devil's party without knowing it" (Blake 1994)—sang hauntingly of the Titans. His language luxuriated in the energies of that which is anterior to the gods and through that (this is me, not Olson) made a space for the Divine Background to all that is and placed a limit on the rule of civilization—not only acknowledging those discontented with civilization (à la Freud and his *Civilization and Its Discontents*) but also assailing the very structure of it.

The Muses tell Hesiod that they "know how to tell many lies and make them sound likely / and they know, when they wish it, how to sing things that are true." But if, with Olson, we invert the structure of value that the Olympian theme imposes upon the *Theogony,* we can very well ask those Hesiodic Muses which things they sing of are *lies* and which are *truths!* I want to consider that the *lies* in Hesiod are the passages that justify the status quo of the Olympian hegemony and the Pan-Hellenic vision of what counts as civilized, and the *truths* are the images and possibilities that the poetry allows to come to appearance in spite of the Olympian bias.

The *Theogony,* then, suggests a harking back to a "being before" in a whole series of senses: that which precedes the Athenian state, that which precedes the advent of civilization, that in us which precedes our domesticated psyches. Today, we can add other anteriorities that govern our lodgings in history: that which precedes literacy, that which precedes language itself, that which precedes the advent of life, that which precedes the present cosmos and its great singularity (the big bang). "What was there that gave rise to all this?" would be the primordial question behind all mythology and scientific cosmology alike.

Hermes, of course, is one of the Olympians, but in our configuration, he *belongs* to that primordial question. He is the name for the notion that *intelligent sentience* and, conversely, *sentient intelligence* belong to Being primordially. He is as much the productive if unruly background for extant multiplicity as he is the uncovering of an intelligible order in inchoate existence. But he is also the spirit of the question itself, not only its mythological and philosophically speculative or scientifically "positive" resolution. He is even behind my feeling of ontological agnosticism—my

intuition that the primordial question is unanswerable by image or discourse but is nonetheless inhabitable on its own ground as what, with Parmenides, will be grasped as Being itself.

Gender and the Gods

Though in perfectly common Greek fashion the gods are capable of homoerotic love and the confounding and recombination of gender categories (Zeus has his Ganymede and the very word *hermaphrodite* joins Hermes and Aphrodite in a single figure), for the most part the Olympians are bigendered. You know which ones are male and which are female; they are sexually paired off, or, in the case of Artemis and Athena, they remain somewhat aggressively celibate. Zeus can turn himself or his sexual object into various animals: Io is a cow, and he himself engenders Clytemnestra, Helen, and Castor and Pollux by turning himself into a swan. But then, he is Zeus. His very ability to take on many forms suggests a more general, primordial condition of being. He expresses his authority through his sexual exceptionalism and capacity to become various animals.

But if one looks at the gender markers of the pre-Olympian deities, you have quite a different story. The very being of Hesiod's monsters involves a merging of fundamental identity characteristics that do not divide primarily along anthropomorphic, bigendered lines. The exuberant teratology of the first generations defy not only gender boundaries but taxonomy itself: Echidna is female, but she is a woman above and a snake below. Typhon has one hundred snake heads, each one, as we mentioned, identified by its own astonishing music. The Cyclopês have only one eye, and there is a special lineage of "hundred handers."

It has often been observed by anthropologists that the incestuous sexual conduct of the gods betoken the very origin not only of the state of existence before sexual differentiation but also an undivided fluency before social organization. As Claude Lévi-Strauss made well known, each society provides itself with fundamental categories of being by determining taboos limiting sexual pairing, in fact establishing the fundamental position of kinship categories for the organization of society. Lévi-Strauss understands the establishment of incest taboos on logical, even mathematical grounds: what in fact is a *continuum* of possibilities (anything in actuality can mix and merge with anything else) is transformed into a discrete array of licit

and illicit combinations. (Sexual taboos are perfectly general: every society has them, though *what* relations are taboo vary from culture to culture.)

But herein one can see something like a mathematical metaphor for a fundamental ontological paradox, for the continuum itself—where transitions from one state of quantity to another are perfectly smooth. Just as there are no missing numbers in the arithmetical continuum or missing positions, points in the geometrical one, the absolutely gapless continuum is simultaneously capable of an infinite number of cuts or divisions. Every point divides the line it is situated on, and it is only through the inclusion of all possible divisions that the smoothness of the continuum is established. The restoration of the primordial continuum as an apt metaphor for Being itself surprisingly does not suppress the will to distinctness, difference, identity: it requires it to go through to the limit.

In the Kabbalah, the Jewish system of theosophical speculation, YHVH (God) himself is androgynous: he has a female counterpart, the Shekinah, his presence that wanders bereft through (fallen) creation. Jewish mystical practice understands itself as seeking to reunite through contemplative prayer (*tikkun*) the bride of God to God himself, though as Elliot R. Wolfson has demonstrated, YHVH is a *male* androgyne, so that this particular speculative mythologem does not decommission Jewish patriarchy. That the ultimate principle of the godhead, the infinite itself (Eyn Sof), has no gender (perhaps that the continuum or the infinite is infinitely divisible though not divided) was not observed in the kabbalistic tradition until the late Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1992–1994), the rumored messiah at the head of the Chabad movement within Hasidism, recognized this (Wolfson 2009, 2020).

In my prospective, theophanic configuration, I imagine something like a complement to the male androgyne of the Jewish tradition to restore, recapitulate, or simply express the undifferentiated continuum of the ultimate. Hermes himself has androgynous properties, but he is the male counterpart, in a possible sense, of the Great Goddess Hekate, who together with Hermes would be a *female* androgyne. The great restoration or repair of the world (*tikkun olam*) would be a fourfold *hieros gamos:* the male and female androgynes in holy erotic congress, an unimaginable double *yab-yum*[*13] restoring the primordial condition that transcends and is yet

immanent within all partitioned hegemonies by refusing to exclude its transfinitely many variations.[†14]

Form upon Chaos

The struggle in the *Theogony* between the Olympians and first the Titans and then Typhon is often seen as a mythic form of the struggle for the imposition of civilized order upon barbaric chaos, as we have seen. It has antecedents in Near Eastern mythological texts such as the *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation text, where the solar deity Marduk slaughters the chthonic female monster Tiamat, imposing slavish order upon Earth, in particular, establishing the Babylonian king as an incarnation of Marduk and imposing a hierarchical social order upon the Babylonian masses, fundamentally as slaves of the gods (the ruling class).

The Olympian order is not so explicitly hegemonic, but its implications actually are. An elite cadre of twelve gods commands the unruly proliferation of divine, semidivine, and daimonic entities. But since the supremacy of the Olympians is tantamount to the assertion of a PanHellenic mentality, those entities are by implication associated with fifty-odd Greek city-states, their geographical qualities and their local political and social forms and storied traditions: a proliferation of civic and mythical possibilities brought under a rule by the Athenian state and its fundamentally mercantile hegemony. Once the Olympian order is in place —that is, once a Pan-Hellenic theological ethos has covered Greece—the gods would no longer be exclusively known by their local incarnations. All cities and rural regions would look toward Olympus, in practice, Athens. The *Theogony* tells the story of the establishment of the Olympian hierarchy but carries, just beneath the surface, the manifold possibilities of existence that preceded Olympus and are not subservient to Zeus.

Hesiod's reining in of the prolific natural and unrestrained divine generation of living forms—establishing the cosmic order as an authoritarian state—prefigures in *mythic* form a very general notion of creativity and world formation that takes *conceptual* form in Plato, some three hundred years after Hesiod's poem is written down. In Plato's dialogue the *Timaeus,* divine order is imposed upon an unruly material chaos. A demiurge—a deity understood as a creator—has access to eternal forms, patterns that are well defined in terms of one another, organized by

mathematical proportion, and ready to be applied to the whirling turbulence of material existence—earth, air, fire, and water all in a turbulent mixture, which are lacking proportional relationships among themselves. The demiurge brings order to chaos and establishes the material universe according to eternal, formal patterns. The forms are atemporal. They do not come into being. They serve as the blueprints for all that is and all that happens. In Plato's cosmos, Being divides between timeless patterns apprehensible through univocally articulated concepts and temporally volatile, material transiencies apprehended imperfectly by human senses.

This picture of order imposed upon chaos becomes, over the twenty-four hundred years since Plato, our most commonly articulated model for artistic creativity, intellectual achievement, and the organization of society itself. In many theologies, the god of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is indeed a demiurge who creates like an architect with a blueprint. History is governed by an "intelligent design" that realizes itself, albeit behind the scenes, in the life of every person, every nation, and the course of the natural cosmos. Intelligence and creativity are understood as the apprehension and imposition of patterns of order. *Unruly* nature is conquered by imposing such patterns upon it. The ethics of human behavior becomes a kind of drama of self-control, where the individual soul struggles to impose reason and order upon the unruly impulses of his or her body or from the various soul activities that inhabit the individual's being. And this version of creativity and its ethics of control over chaos justifies and even mandates the hegemony of the human race over the wilderness or wildness in nature, in society, and in the soul.

Psychoanalysis and various contemporary philosophical and mathematical schools (phenomenology on the one hand and complexity theory on the other), if pressed, must dismiss out of hand (or else provide reductive explanations for) the existence of gods and nonhuman or mythical entities of every kind. Nevertheless, in rather convincing ways, they suggest that the processes by which life-forms emerge in nature, artists witness forms emerge in their creative work, and even the scientific intellect arrives at its systematic thinking do not at all occur by way of imposing eternal patterns upon an inchoate and turbulently resistant matter. Matter itself is "pregnant with form" (Merleau-Ponty 2014), not its passive recipient, and form itself is not imposed from on high but indeed emerges in various ways when conditions are ripe for its emergence and when intelligence—not in

the form of the imposition of will but, in the words of Herbert Guenther (1975), a German Buddhist philosopher, the "discriminative-appreciative" quality of awareness—attends to the materials at hand and solicits, observes, and favors emerging apparencies.

The process of creation seems in this way more like magical invocation or psychic scrying rather than the imposition of willful order. Though in the popular imagination there remains a struggle between natural science and the traditional picture of creation by intelligent design enacted by the deity, I want to proclaim on behalf of Hermes that creativity under a Green Hermetic regime does not find it necessary to impose form upon chaos. Hermes draws form forth from the matter at hand.

Bardic Performance as Theophany

Before being written down, the Homeric poems and the tradition that gives us the Hesiodic poems were in the hands of local oral poets who improvised the tales of the gods and heroes native to their own cities. Over the centuries, they did so in a developing—emerging—mode of language that evolved forms of articulation, metrical patterns, oratorical styles, specific tales, and systems of tales, often involving the validation of local customs and the legitimation of local ruling families through the tracing of their lineages to gods and their epiphanies. Many of the heroes in the *Iliad,* for instance, are introduced before the battle that usually portrays their violent demise, together with brief narratives that provide their lineal bona fides. These gods might be major figures like Hera, Demeter, Poseidon, Hermes, or Zeus, but they might also be the spirits of local geological features—rivers, lakes, groves, volcanoes, mountains, forests, gorges, ravines. But in any case, the tradition or traditions of oral performance lay somewhere between what we know as popular musical performances, sacrificial rituals, Vodoun ceremonies, and civic festivals. The power of poetry was the capacity of the bard to engage members of the audience and create in them a state of rapture through the inspired bard's poetic performance and his or her power to manifest the gods. The sense of a divine presence emerges through the bard's tales and colors the social occasion and the very affect of what counts as true or real.

In Hesiod, the name Mnemosyne (the mother of the Muses) is usually translated as "memory," but perhaps its meaning is more like "mindedness"

or “mindfulness” (the *mne* root means “mind”). In any case, her activation brings the powers of intelligent invention: memory not of this or that memorial content but of the power inherent in invention itself, the power to enthrall an audience, to make that which would seem to be, come to appear before the audience through the song of the poet.

All this is what I call upon Hermes to define. The power of poetic language—“language charged with meaning to its fullest extent,” as Ezra Pound calls it—to induce a sense of being, to bring before the mind’s eye the content of the poem (Pound’s *phanopoeia*). This power to induce apparency is magic, and the suppression or truncation of it activates the dark trickster phenomenon. The power of the Hermetic muse is not in the possession of any one individual, even if its expression works through and with an individual mind. The success of an individual in delivering this power does not accrue to or from the poet’s personality, least of all the poet’s “brand”—to use the grotesque contemporary distortion of creative identity—but pertains to and flows from his or her being insofar as it communes with Being itself and in the first and last instance *is* it. It is something that can manifest through an individual but also may accumulate across time and pass from one individual to another in a lineage of tradition or assemble itself among a given people collectively. When a poet goes into a trance, her personal identity and capacity for language surrenders to a transpersonal possibility that may be activated from a traditional lineage, but the transpersonal state may also arise directly from the enthused response of the audience to her work; however it comes about, a trance-ecstasy is among the conditions for the god’s epiphany and its very being.

Memory might here be of the forms and stories that the poet’s training makes available. But it is, on a deeper level, the ability to summon (remember) the power that such a traditional training carries, preserves, activates, embodies, and paradoxically energizes, even through incommensurate incursions and the dynamics of disruption.

The Muses are mythical mediators of that power of memory, and that power is itself a canalization, a manifestation, a particular form of the Hermetic Genius. It may occur in the trance of the individual poet, but if it does, it effects and affects the state of being of the audience as well.

Jane Harrison writes that “the god is the projection of his *thiasos*” (Harrison 2018): the *thiasos* is the specific group of worshippers, like a

band of maenads celebrating the presence of Dionysos. But given that the ontological character of the thiasos is itself profoundly unknown, since the prerequisite for participation is the relinquishment of ontological positivity itself, relinquishment of the certainties of personal identity, and through that relinquishment the actuation of the immediate power of *agnosia,* to open to the incursive force of the god (since it is not *belief* that facilitates the theophany but *openness*)—given all this it seems that Harrison's formula is unnecessarily reductive and concedes too much to the positivities of anthropological research. One could just as well say that *the thiasos is the projection of the god,* since the collectivity that is the thiasos is only gathered and identified by its manifestation of and as the deity—its wildly embodied imagination of the divine form that in fact is the condition of its own collective being, its ecstasy, its trance, its collective vision. In *The Bacchae,* Euripides's play about Dionysos, a chorus of maenads chants and dances to a specific poetic meter that is the rhythm of that ecstasy: *Ite Bácchai, Ite Bácchai, paida theon theou* (Go Bacchus, Go Bacchus, child of a god). The god himself manifests in and as the rhythm that drives the ecstatic dance. And the ecstasy thrills to a pitch of violence, for the god must be torn apart—his *sparagmos*—for the destructive aspect of the creative process (the destruction of the fruit to reveal and scatter the seed) is inseparable from the production of the fruit's further bounty. The seasonal rhythm is one of creation and destruction, as is the creative movement of time itself—the continuous coming into being and passing away of all that comes to appear.

In parallel with the god and his thiasos (without necessarily the dramatic violence, though this shows, too, in the poetic content as often as not), the muse that the poet calls upon appears through the composition of the poem. This form, this apparency, this tone, this voice, this energy is not a given form that exists somewhere independently of its advent so much as a being emergent with the events it inspires. There is an intransitive (middle-voice) series of relations between muse, poet, poem, and reader or audience. But the being of the muse—the sense that poetic inspiration does not originate within the limited personality or ego of the poet—is an ineliminable member of this intransitive series.

More on the Divine Background

The *Theogony,* though completed at the opening of the classical period, bears stories and figures of an earlier age.

The Hesiod tradition goes back several centuries before the *Theogony* was written down; that is, completed as we have seen. The traces of the bygone age are layered in the poetry itself. Hesiod's poem itself narrates the very transition—as if historically—from precosmic darkness to the securing of Mount Olympus by the twelve Olympians, the establishment of the well-articulated hierarchy of the classical pantheon, and the stabilization of a differentiated, intelligible world. The *Theogony* performs this by expressing what modern thinkers consider a "historical" transition, in terms of cosmogonic and theogonic mythography.

The *Theogony* begins before the birth of the gods and the organization of the world, before the separation of sky, sea, land, and underworld, before the differentiation of day from night. The poem shows us a state of things just before the birth of the gods; however, it remains silent about the ultimate nature of Being itself, though there will be a sense, never clearly articulated, that a principle of divinity (of a divine realm or condition or ultimate truth of things) before and beyond the gods obtains for the Hesiodic poet, as we have seen. In my configuration, that Divine Background continues to exist even after the gods and the cosmos already are there. It is a *configuration* for Being itself. It can never be described in definite terms, since to do so would require that what those terms might describe would already have come into being, but it is just such a coming-into-being that concerns the *Theogony.* The Divine Background is not configured as among such things. We can think of it—but only metaphorically—as before anything existed but more precisely as existing eternally, for "before" implies the being of time, and time itself is among the things that quite paradoxically seems to have emerged into being. That which exists eternally is not in time at all. But in the poetics of the *Theogony,* to think back in time is to travel in mind in the direction of that primordial background. Time past is the veil of eternity; that is, the timeless character of *what is* that issues forth the generations that is time itself. Eternity "survives" its emanation of time and "is" as the esoteric background to the (apparently) well-ordered character both of the cosmos as we know it and the not-yet-ordered state of things out of which the ordered cosmos was formed. It is also, in the context of the *Theogony,* the secret background beyond the Olympian hegemony, which the gods would

call upon to legitimize social stratification (human and divine) but which actually remains aloof from the order of things it is called upon to legitimize.

The Divine Background is aloof from kings and serfs, oligarchs and slaves, and from caste-based divisions of labor, but it is also aloof from the pecking order of the gods, from Zeus as ruler of the gods, from his brothers as lesser partners, from half-human heroes and demigods, nymphs and satyrs, and so on, down the chain. The Divine Background lies behind and is the mysterious origin of all organized and *disorganized* phenomena. It precedes and is the ultimate ground of language itself, of logic and what defies logic, of what can be expressed as sense and what as nonsense, and even what is *not even nonsense*. It defies even determinate representations, however incoherent or anomalous, such as the "Barbarous Names" intoned as magical invocations in the *Greek Magical Papyri,* or the astonishing sonic utterances of Typhon's heads. Being allows these articulations just as much as it allows the formation of a more or less stable phenomenal world, self-consistent philosophical thought, sensuously harmonious works of art, or the well-regimented state organized for commerce or war. Existence itself, its verbally correlated identities, its directly manifest expressions are all appearances that Being allows to *become* appearances. As such, all manner of things appear as expressions of the Divine Background.

Though the poem does not name this, it does provide terms for that which precedes the generation of the Olympian pecking order: the reign of the Titans and, before that, Gaia, Xaos, Eros, Erebos, and Night.

Defining these in cosmogonic terms with their implied Divine Background, the poem's narrative culminating with the triumph of Zeus would lend legitimacy to the reigning order of things. But that order itself belongs to time and is therefore transitory even though the gods are immortal. Immortality and longevity are not eternity. Time is radically transitory. Whatever endures or has its form across vanishing time does so by participating in timelessness in its own manner. Thus longevity, immortality, or anything that articulates a time-span form (gesture, poem, performance, action) gives an intimation of and is dependent upon the timeless eternity of Being itself. Time-span forms stand in for and bear witness to the Divine Background that is not bound by time.

Fate, Chance, Divination

Fate has certain incongruous features in the *Theogony*. It is configured as the Moirai, or the Fates, three sisters, called Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, who spin the web of destiny and determine the termination of things—death for mortals, the loss of sovereignty for gods and kings. But clearly the sisters themselves have come into being under the same figure of generation as the other deities. What then destined *them*? There is something in the Divine Background that is of a deeper fatality than fate itself—a fate that fatalizes fate! But what, then, for the Greeks is fate?

Greek has several words for it. In addition to *moira* is *potmos,* meaning "what befalls one" (from *pipto,* "to fall"), and *aisimos,* meaning "according to what is destined." They all gather meaning around the idea of apportionment: the dividing of a substance into portions to be distributed to individuals so that what happens to them is counted as what is due to them, what they are entitled to by the apportionment of fate. An idea of justice, "what is due to one," derives from this (see the opening chapters of Plato's *Republic*) but also a certain sense of chance. What one is allotted comes by casting lots. One's portion is one's allotment, what the chance of the draw delivers to one or delivers one over to. And the casting of lots seems to be a metaphor for what has been determined in advance of how things actually happen to one.

Now logically, we think that fate is the antithesis of chance. Fate is determined as if in accordance with a pattern or plan, while chance is happenstance—it just happens at random. Enthusiasts of science and believers in divine providence collide over whether history is random occurrence or divine plan. But if the ultimate arbiter of what happens is Being itself, and Being itself stands behind and beyond all organized existence, whether as social stratification, divine hierarchy, or the stable identities of existent things, and also behind the unplanned contingency of occurrences, then there is a secret communion between order and randomness, between the determined and the random course of things, between what later philosophy will conceptualize as contingency (chance) and necessity (logically or causally determined order). Being itself, whose fecundity is evident in the vast multiplicity of entities and occurrences, is also responsible for the entropic play of accidents, the ultimate coming apart of that which has been brought to order.

The communion between chance and necessity plays a part in most systems of divination, not only among the Greeks but throughout the world. The consultation of an oracle involves the use of chance to select a reading from an ordered system of possibilities: the shuffled deck of the seventy-eight symbolic tarot cards, the tossing of coins or yarrow stalks to select from among the sixty-four hexagrams in the I Ching, the Chinese Book of Changes, and indeed in the innumerable oracular systems found everywhere. In the European Middle Ages, Fortuna (Fortune or Fate) was what one "met" through chance encounters, though the wheel of fortune brought to cyclical order the occurrence of good luck and bad. Fate itself, as the union of chance and determinacy, is itself a covering, a configuration of Being.

Intransitivity

The coexistence of fate as a covering of Being and the three sisters' administration of fate, while they themselves are products of it, is an instance of what in logic is called an intransitive relation. A *transitive* relation holds between things that occur in a sequence where if event B follows event A and C follows B, A comes before C, but C cannot come before A. The relations between the generations are *transitive*. If Millicent is a descendant of Grigor and Grigor of Wolfgang, Millicent is a descendant of Wolfgang, but Wolfgang cannot be a descendant of Grigor. Similarly if occurrence alpha *causes* event beta and beta causes gamma, alpha is among the ultimate causes of gamma, but gamma cannot cause alpha. Generation and causality are transitive relations. In general, temporal relations are transitive.

There are structures, however, where transitivity does not hold, and these tend to cause the mind that tries to work them out either to enter into a state of confusion or transcendental ecstasy, according to one's state of being or ontological type. Where temporal order does not obtain, intransitivities appear. And this happens whenever one tries to work out how language and cognition in general relate to time: for language and mind always involve nontemporal factors. Similarly, classical logical relations of entailment can be intransitive because they are essentially atemporal. In a logically consistent system like Euclidean geometry, all the theorems are mutually entailed. Because logic partakes of the atemporal, it has seemed natural to Platonists that one should look for eternity in the

necessary connections between logically related ideas. (And there are indeed logicians whose personal ecstasy revels in logic's radical consistency.) Still, both logic and common language come into being historically, and historical time is radically impermanent. An inescapable conundrum pervades language, logic, and the most concrete aspect of materialist ontology, the concreteness of transitory time; namely, the mutually inescapable being of time and eternity.

Atemporality and Eternity

Though live speech takes place in time, language cannot be accounted for by temporal sequence alone. Every noun in a language may refer to things in time and every act enacted (in proxy) by a verb takes place in time, but the nouns and verbs are available atemporally. I know, for instance, the meaning of the word *elephant* without an elephant being present. The word names every elephant that ever was or will be, whether in Africa, India, the Bronx Zoo, a story in *The Arabian Nights,* or an engram in my memory or imagination. The noun holds its meanings without regard to the time in which its reference obtains or the time of each occasion of use. Similarly, syntax involves the intrusion of an atemporal factor. It takes time for the structure of an uttered sentence to unfold. One only knows how words at the beginning of an utterance one hears (or reads) are being used as the sentence or clause that holds them comes to an end. As the utterer of such a sentence, one must hold what one wants to say in mind as one develops that sentence. Intended meaning is suspended—hung there, as if a bridge across vanishing moments—between subject and verb or between main and subordinate clauses as they form themselves. This is possible because the relations that syntax represents hold apart from the temporal sequence in which they are expressed. An atemporal factor is involved in nouns. An atemporal factor lies behind all syntax (Berwick and Chomsky 2017).

The inescapably atemporal aspects of language render paradoxical any attempt to assign linear successiveness to occurrences in time; that is to say to history—whether the history of human events or the history of the cosmos. It is all too possible to *refer* to events and sequences of events that no longer or do not yet exist. An essential temporal paradox seems to obtain: according to an inalienable aspect of the intuition of time, what has gone by has *really* gone by—it doesn't hang around somewhere in the past. It no longer exists. And yet memory and language and the construction of

scientific theories conspire to generate the past and the future. We have calendars that assign indices for any time whatsoever, past, present, or future. Is the past an illusion of memory and language? Or is the atemporality of language and the calendar somehow built into the natural cosmos that evolved them? Is atemporality as in Parmenides a feature of Being itself?

All the "befores"—*before* the Olympians, *before* the hierarchicalization of cosmos and society, *before* writing, *before* speech, the very idea of an origin as a beginning in time—point to a primordial difference or separation or distinction severing all that is "in time" from Being itself and, in the same thought, hint at an inalienable connection between time and timeless eternity *through* Being, since everything that in any way comes to have an appearance, says Parmenides, does so by appearing to be.

TWO

THE *HOMERIC HYMN TO HERMES*

INTRODUCTION

Karl Kerényi remarks somewhere that a well doesn't furnish water—Earth does. We go to the well to draw what it has gathered from Earth's broadly distributed underground resources. And that there are poems that in regard to their spiritual content are truly, in this respect, like wells. The information they carry comes to them from far and wide—from the traditional and local past of its own composition, from tributary sources, and even, in anticipation of potential readership and interpretation, from the future.

The *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* belongs to the collection of ancient Greek poetry known as the *Homeric Hymns*—poems composed in dactylic hexameter, the meter of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad,* and dedicated to classical Greek gods. Some of the hymns are almost as old as the Homeric epics themselves. The composition of many of them belongs to the Homeric tradition of oral improvisation going back several hundred years before finally being written down in or about the eighth century BCE. Others are very late, purely literary compositions. The *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* appears to be between these extremes. It may very well have a prehistory as an orally improvised subject, but it has all the earmarks of a self-conscious literary text, complete with complex ironies and allusions, even one direct assimilation of a line from another poem. It probably dates from the sixth or fifth century BCE, but the tributary material includes plenty that is archaic —that is, pre-Olympian—and, as a repository of mythic potential, plenty that requires the long future to show its splendor.

The Homeric poems—both epics and hymns (and a catalogue of other surviving texts as well, including Hesiod's *Theogony*) are believed by contemporary scholars to have taken their final form, as we have seen, as part of a grand cultural tendency of Greece of the eighth, seventh, and sixth centuries BCE to realize a Pan-Hellenic mentality—a sense that the plethora of city-states from the western coast of Asia Minor to Grecian colonies in Italy made up not only a robust field of commercial activity but also a common world, with gods, heros, cults, myths, and cosmologies circumscribed by a single and fairly well-coordinated vision. The vision was the cosmos as seen from the celestial reaches of Mount Olympus, an actual mountain in central Greece, with Zeus as its high god and the eleven additional Olympians—Hera, Athena, Poseidon, Hades, Demeter, Artemis, Hephaistos, Dionysos, Aphrodite, Apollo, and Hermes—as his participating subalterns. It expressed itself primarily through the recitation of the Homeric poems at great PanHellenic festivals and other official civic and religious occasions and through the celebration of the Olympic games and other regularly held athletic events, the latter inviting the display of athletic prowess and poetic skill with poems recited and danced to by trained choruses.

The Pan-Hellenic Olympian mentality fostered versions of myths about the gods brought into coordination and harmony with the Olympian universe. Before being assimilated to Olympus, Demeter had cults spread over the entirety of the Grecian world, with several different consorts, different progeny, and involvement in various cycles of myth. Hermes has at least four different sets of parents besides being sired by Zeus upon Maia as told in the *Hymn to Hermes*. Geographical historians such as Pausanias traveled about Greece in late antiquity and gathered these stories, so considerable information survives concerning the diversity of local cults and practices. Each of the four major Homeric hymns tells a tale of how a local god becomes assimilated into the Olympian family. Here, Hermes, born in the mountain fastnesses of Arcadia in central Greece, and initially moved to play tricks on the Olympian Apollo, is brought into the fold.

The alternative genealogies show that the unified Olympian character is itself an arrival on the historical scene by a kind of semiconscious configurative activity, assembling tributary material into a single figure without necessarily completely suppressing the variants. But when the pertinence of that configuration passes, aspects of the figure lacking in

emphasis in the Olympian version may easily return and offer themselves for further configuration. Thus Hermes, in Hellenistic times, is freed from his Olympian restriction as a messenger and resumes his identification with the Egyptian god Thoth—an identification that Greeks as early as Herodotus (fifth century BCE) had recognized. Thoth in the Egyptian pantheon is a far more majestic figure than Olympian Hermes. He invents and administers the entire cosmic and cultural system of Egypt. He is the heart-mind of the sun god. With the Hellenization of the Eygyptian monarchy after the Alexandrian conquest, Hermes explicitly reunites with Thoth. A new configuration emerges in the person of Hermes Trismegistus —Thrice Great Hermes—both god and cultural hero, a figure that will surface again and again down to the present. The Hermes of the *Hymn* is a miraculous newborn who immediately reveals himself as an enfant terrible —contriving to steal the sacred cattle of Apollo before he is one day old and mercilessly sacrificing a tortoise, out of whose shell he invents the lyre. The lyre will help him mollify Apollo's wrath, but it does much more than this: it proves to be a means of divination and a musical instrument that broadens and deepens the possibilities of musical expression. Hermes is a thief and a con man, a cunning little devil, but at the same time he shows a range of abilities that makes him a figure for the human intellect entire.

THE *HOMERIC HYMN TO HERMES*

Original Greek consulted for my translation is from *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns, and Homerica,* translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1977.

Make a hymn to Hermes, Muse, son of Zeus and Maia,
goddess-nymph of Kyllene and Arkadia rich in flocks—
messenger of immortals, quick-as-death, born to Maia,
a nymph with beautiful hair—bashful goddess:
she mingled in love with Zeus
but now spurns the fellowship of the blessèd gods
and lives alone in a shadowy cavern

where Kronos' son is wont to lie with her,
that nymph of the beautiful hair,
under cover of night
(while sweet sleep spellbinds white-armed Hera)—
far from immortal gods and mortal humans.

But when the lust of mighty Zeus was sated,
and Maia's tenth-month moon was fixed in the heavens,
she bore a child of winning wiles, a creature of infinite devices,
cattle driver, dream conductor, watcher by night, thief at the gates,
a creature soon to manifest notable accomplishments among the gods.
Dawn-born, by midday
he was plucking the lyre;
by sundown he'd pilfered the sacred cows of Apollo—
all this, on the fourth of the month, the day Lady Maia bore him.
Once he'd leaped from his mother's womb,
he tarried not at all
about the winnowing basket she used as a cradle
but vaulted the threshold of the high-roofed cave
and went after those cows.

In the cave-yard was a turtle, in whom he discerned
a thousand pleasures to come.
(Hermes, indeed, was first

to turn the silent turtle to making music.)
The tardily waddling creature
was eating high grass blades
just outside of the dwelling.
The messenger-quick-as-death
laughed and addressed it:

“It’s a sign! Good fortune for me! And so soon!
I do not reject or deny it.
Hello, O soul of the dance-beat,
O lovely-to-look-at *hetaera* of the banquet
happily appearing before me without further ado.
But where did you get that gorgeous garment (ahem),
that fantastically ornamented carapace—
and you but a turtle, living in the wastes of these
mountains?
I’ll take you into the cave—you’ll be—of *use*—
no dishonor intended—but primarily (I can see it)—great
profit for *me*—
though I perceive you’d do better to stay back at home—
danger lurks out there beyond the portal!
Alive, you’ll work as a charm against witchcraft.
If you die, you’ll make beautiful music.”
So he spoke.
And lifting in both his hands the happy plaything,
he took it into the cavern
and scooped out its spinal marrow with a chisel of iron.

And just as swift thought
shoots right through the breast of a man
when thronging anxieties distract him,
or just as sparkling glances whirl from his eyes,
so did it become the practice of noble Hermes to weave
word and deed together in a single action.
He cut reed stalks and attached them
at measured spans
through the shell of the tortoise
and with dexterity stretched
an ox skin across it,
put the horns in and their cross piece,
and set the seven sheep-gut strings.

Once he'd completed its fashioning
he took up the happy contrivance
and gave it a try with a plectrum, part
by part. It sounded just fantastic under his fingers.
And the god *sang* very well—about whatever occurred
to him, improvising like boys
bandying taunts at some festival.
And of what, first of all, did he improvise?
He sang of Zeus and Maia with the beautiful sandals—
how once they two made love and begot *him*—
he came out with the whole glorious business!—
and he winked in song at his mother's chamber girls
and praised her glittering villas
with their tripods distributed everywhere
and their kettles overflowing.

But even while he was striking off these ditties,
other matters occupied his thought:
he'd contrived a hank'ring for meat,
so
stashing the hollow lyre in his cradle blankets,
he was out again from his mother's sweet-scented dwelling,
this time up to a lofty lookout
plotting high chicanery in his heart,
such as subdolous persons pursue in black night,
lusting after something.

Helios was descending under the earth toward Okeanos
with horses and car,
and Hermes came scurrying along
on his way toward the shadowy hills of Pieria.
There the immortal cows of the blessèd gods
had their stables
and did their cow things
in an uncut meadow, quite delightful.

Of these, the son of Maia, the keen-sighted Slayer of Argos,
split off fifty loud-bellowing heifers
and drove the scattered lot of them
across a sandy plane;
nor did he neglect *this* crafty strategem:
he caused their hooves to stride backward
so that front feet seemed back feet, back feet front,

while he himself marched along in the conventional manner.

To accomplish the ruse, he'd woven
wicker-work sandals by the sands of the sea—
an act of sheer thaumaturgy producing
inconceivable and previously unimagined footwear.
Here's how he did it:
Having taken pains to prepare for a considerable journey
in a manner peculiar to his wiles,
he twisted together twigs of tamarisk and myrtle
and bound them under his feet as nimble shoes.
He'd already strung together a bundle of fresh branches,
including the leaves, plucked in Pieria.
But an old fellow pruning his vineyard happened to take
note of him
speeding across the fields to grassy Onchestus. Said Hermes:

"Old fellow, tending your vines, though your shoulders are
stooping,
wine aplenty shall flow from their fruit
once these shoots of yours ripen—
if you manage NOT to see what in fact you are seeing
and to be deaf to that which you hear.
Mum's the word. Then no harm shall befall
what rightly belongs to you."

That said, noble Hermes gathered the cattle
and drove them through shadowy mountains,
down sounding gorges, across fresh flowering fields.

At this point the daimon that is Night,
Hermes' murky ally, had almost come to a close.
The hour just before daybreak
that gets people up and working,
was just coming on.
Bright Selene, daughter of Pallas, Megamedes' son
(that is, the moon) had climbed her lookout.
The mighty son of Zeus
took the cows of Apollo
to the river Alphaeus.

When he'd fed the loud-bellowing beasts with proper fodder
and packed them into the cow-fold
to sup on dewy galingale and lotus,
he gathered a woodpile and invented summarily
the art of starting woodfires.
Selecting branches of shining laurel,
he trimmed them, and, with iron firm in hand . . .
induced the spark
and the fragrant heat went up.
For Hermes was the first
to draw fire from fire sticks.
Taking many dry ones
he piled them thick in a deep trench.
Flame flashed

sending abroad
a fearsome blaze.

As the force of Hephaistos was beginning to get the fire going,
single-handedly he dragged
two bellowing cows
near to the trench
for great power was in him.

He threw them snorting to the ground, pulling their heads back
and rolled them onto their sides
to get at the spines and to pierce
to the spinal marrow.

He proceeded from deed to deed
cutting the meat rich in fat
punctured by wood spits—
flesh and venerable backs and black blood together
to be cooked with the entrails.

Then he set all that apart
and spread the skins on a jagged rock
so that even now, long after
so much time has gone by
there they are—clear to behold—in perpetuity.

Next, happy-minded Hermes dragged the rich
results of his labors—that is, the meat—
onto a flat *smooth* rock

and divided the lot in twelve equal portions
showing perfect honor to each one.
And Hermes was ravenous to gorge on the holy meat
for the sweet odor overcame him, though he was a god.
Not that his proud heart succumbed.
Rather
he stashed all that flesh and fat
high away in the loft of the stable
as a monument
to his precocious thieving,
and then he gathered more dry sticks
to utterly condemn to the flames the heads and the hooves.

Now, when the Daimon Hermes had done what had to
be done,
he threw his sandals away in deep eddying Alphaeus.
He cooled and extinguished the black embers with sand,
watching all night while the moon shined down.
Then he headed back
to the bright peaks of Kyllene,
neither god nor person intercepting him this time,
and no dogs dogged his trail on the long trip home.

When he got there, Hermes slipped slanting edgewise
through a keyhole in the cave-hall door
like a cool late summer breeze or like a mist.
Straight through the cave he rushed

to the rich inner chamber,
soft stepping, advancing, not thumping loudly
as one might
upon the floor,
but glorious Hermes furiously sped to the cradle
and wrapping his blankets
about his shoulders like a feeble neonate,
he lay there playing with the coverlet over his knees,
though on his left he secured the lyric turtle.

But the god had not eluded his goddess mother. She said:

“You bloody rogue! Whence do you come
in the middle of the night
wearing shamelessness as your cloak?
The son of Leto will surely
tie you up with a rope about your rib cage
and drag you out of doors—
or else you’ll have to live like a thief in the glens
by stealth and wiles. So up with you!
Your father begot you to be
nothing but a terrible nuisance to gods and mortals.”

Hermes responded to her with wily speech:
“Mother, why do you try to scare me with such business,
as if I were a feeble babe,
ignorant of the language of blame
within the human breast,

a trembling infant who fears his mother's scowling?
You know I will try out
whatever plan seems best to me,
feeding myself, and you too, uninterruptedly.
And, by the way, we'll not stay here, alone of the gods
unattended by prayers and offerings, as is your habit.
Better to live among them for all our days,
wealthy, well-stocked with grain,
than to make our home in this gloomy cave.
And as regards to prerogatives,
either I shall share
in the rites that Apollo has,
or, if my father refuses me that,
I'll seek, as well I can,
to make myself the very prince of felons!
And if Leto's illustrious son tries to find me,
a thing I think he won't like will likely befall him:
I go to Delphi
—break into that big building of his
—plunder his tripods
—knock over his cauldrons
—make away with his brilliant iron and shining gold
also his fancy garments—
You'll be a party to *this,* if you want to."

With words like these, they spoke to one another—
Son of Zeus Aegis-holder and Lady Maia.

Now Dawn, who bears the early light to mortals,
was rising from deep-flowing Okeanos.

And at that moment Apollo approached Onchestus,
the exceedingly lovely, sacred grove
of loud-bellowing Earth-holder Poseidon.
There he found an old man grazing some animal
on an out-path out past his courtyard fence.
The glorious son of Leto was first to speak.

“Old fellow—thorn-plucker of grassy Onchestus—
I come from Pieria looking for my cows.
All the ones from my herd have curling horns.
A blue-black bull was grazing apart from the others.
Fierce-eyed hounds were chasing behind—four of them.
All of one mind.
Like men.
The hounds and the bull stayed back.
This in itself is a marvel.
But yesterday, when the sun was just going down,
—apart from the sweet pasture
out of the gentle meadow
the cattle vanished.
So tell me, good fellow, born long ago, if perhaps you have seen
a man
following along
behind those cows.”
The old man replied:

“My boy, it is difficult to put into words all that the eye sees.

Many sorts of travelers pass by here,
some bent on mischief, some intent on good—
and it's tough to speak for each one.
But it seemed to me I saw a child—I think I did—
following along behind a herd of long-horned cattle.
He was walking from side to side, with a sort of staff,
driving them backward,
keeping their heads facing toward him."

So the old man spoke.

And when Apollo heard him, he sped at once on his way,
and recognized an omen in a long-winged bird:
the thief of the cattle was the child of Zeus, son of Kronos,
so the son of Zeus, Lord Apollo, headed toward to Pylos
to find his slow-footed cows,
having shrouded his broad shoulders in a purple cloud.

And when Apollo-who-shoots-from-afar
actually saw the cattle tracks, he exclaimed:

"Amazing!
These over here
indeed are the tracks of straight-horned oxen,
but they're heading back to the meadow.
And these other ones cannot belong
to man or woman,
to lion, gray wolf, or to bear, or shaggy centaur either.

What kind of beast's swift feet
leave such extraordinary footprints?
Astonishing are the tracks
on this side of the path,
but even more astonishing
are those left on the other."
So speaking, Lord Apollo, son of Zeus, took off again,
and came to the ever-wooded mountain of Kyllene,
to the deeply shaded cavern in the rock
where our ambrosial nymph had given birth
to the child of Zeus, son of Kronos.
A pleasant odor perfumed the pleasant hillside
and many
skinny-ankled sheep on the grass were grazing.
And Apollo-who-shoots-from-afar himself stepped down
over the stony threshold
into the dark cave.

And when the son of Zeus and Maia became aware
that Apollo-who-shoots-from-afar was in a rage over his cattle, he sank into his fragrant blanket.
Just as wood ash
conceals the ember of a wood fire,
so Hermes concealed himself when he caught a glimpse
of that god-who-acts-from-afar.
He contracted head, hands, and feet within small compass,
like an infant falling into slumber.

In fact he was wide awake, with his turtle stashed under

his armpit.

But the son of Zeus and Leto

was perfectly aware and wary

of the beautiful mountain nymph and *her* dear son—

that little child, tucked in and so deviously swaddled.

Apollo inspected every nook and cranny of the nymph's

great house

and unlocked her closets with a shining key.

They were full of nectar and ambrosia,

great caches of silver and gold,

and Maia's sumptuous wardrobe, garments

of silver white and Phoenician purple,

such as sacred dwellings of the blesséd gods store inside them.

And when he'd flushed out every corner of the house

the son of Leto addressed illustrious Hermes:

"O child, who lies in cradle,

put me in mind of my cows without delay

since otherwise we two will fall out quite indecorously.

For I will seize and toss you

into misty Tartaros,

into darkness

numinous

hopeless

and neither your father nor mother will be able

to release you up into the light,
but under earth you'll wander
and be the mighty hegemon of dead children."

Hermes responded with tricky discourse:

"Son of Leto, such intemperate speech!
You come here seeking field cows?
I haven't seen, I haven't ascertained, I haven't heard from
another
anything about them
so I cannot put you in mind of them
or claim reward for so doing.
Do I *look* like a cattle rustler—some kind of muscle man?
This is hardly my business—other matters concern me:
sleep concerns me, and milk from my *mother's* teats,
and to have warm blankets wrapped around my shoulders
and nice hot baths. And I hope that no one will wonder
from what our dispute arises.
'Twould be a great marvel among the immortals
that a newborn child should come into the front of the house
with field cows. You deal in impossibilities.
I was just born yesterday.
My feet are tender and the ground is rough.
If you wish, I'll swear a great oath on the head of my father
that I am not myself nor have I seen another

who is the thief of your cows—whatever *cows* are—
their very existence is but a rumor to me!”

So he spoke.

And casting glances sharply from his eyes,
he kept working his eyebrows and looking here and there
and whistling while listening to Apollo talk.

Apollo-who-works-from-afar
while laughing softly said to him:

“You knavish pipsqueak—with mendacity and craft in your
heart—
you speak so guilelessly I’m persuaded—
that tonight you’ve broken into
many a well-secured domicile
and fleeced more than one
unsuspecting wight
silently assembling pelf
from all over the messuages.
No doubt you’ll be a plague
to many rustic herdsmen
in mountain glades
whenever you come upon cattle herds
or sheep with ample fleeces
and contrive a hankering for meat.

“But come now, you companion of black night,

if you would not sleep your last—
get out of that cradle!
I concede you have earned the right among the immortals
to be known as Prince of Felons for all your days."

So spoke Apollo
and grabbed the child
and picked him up,
but strong Argeiphontes had his resources:
While still held in his arms,
he distracted Phoebus Apollo by issuing an omen:
A fat peasant appeared out of nowhere.
Then Hermes sneezed.
Apollo tuned in to it and dropped the boy
and, though eager to get going, played along,
sitting right down on the ground with illustrious Hermes.

"Fear not, little Hermes," he said, "son of Zeus and Maia—
I'll find the strong cattle by means of these omens,
and you shall show me the way."

Kyllenian Hermes sprang up instantly
and pushed the blanket he'd wrapped about his shoulders
up over his ears
and made *this* speech:

“Where are you taking me, Far-worker—most hasty of all
the gods?
Is it because of your cows that you are angered
and so seek to provoke me?
Pfooey! I’d let the whole species of cows go down to ruin!
For I did not steal *your* cows, nor see another do it—
whatever *cows* are: their very existence is but a rumor to me.
I demand justice! Lets take our case
to Kronion Zeus!”

Hermes, the shepherd, and the brilliant son of Zeus
were both thus taking matters very much to heart
contending explicitly for each point.
Apollo, speaking truthfully, not unjustly
would have seized illustrious Hermes
had the Kyllenian not wished to make a fool
of the God of the Silver Bow
with stratagems and false flattering speeches.
But as soon as Hermes discovered that Apollo
was just as resourceful as he,
he urgently began to tramp across the sands,
himself in the lead,
the son of Zeus and Leto following after.

The two fair offspring of Kronion Zeus
quickly came up to their father
at the summit of fragrant Olympus,

for there the scales of Justice were set for them both
and there, on snow-covered Olympus,
just after Dawn of the Golden Throne
the indestructible, immortal gods were gathered.

Hermes and Apollo of the Silver Bow
stood at the knees of High-Thundering Zeus,
and Zeus inquired of his illustrious son, putting this speech
to him:
“Phoebus, whence did you pick up this plunder—
this newborn child
who has the noble stature of a herald?
This matter that comes to the gods’ assembly
seems to be quite grave.”

Lord Apollo-who-works-from-afar answered thus:

“O Father, you shall hear forthwith a tale not easily trivialized,
though you jest that I myself am a lover of plunder.
Here indeed is a child—a manifest ravager—whom I found
at the end of a long journey
in the mountains of Kyllene.
I myself have never seen such a cozener
on earth among gods or humans.
Having stolen my cows from a meadow
he drove them at dusk along
the beaches of the loud-roaring sea
straight toward Pylos.

There were two sets of tracks—extraordinary—
something to be wondered at—the work of a marvelous
daimon.
The black dust showed the hoofprints of the cows
but heading back toward that flowering meadow,
while he himself—astonishing fellow—
seemed to have crossed the
sand off the path
by means of neither hands nor feet
but furnished with some other contrivance
—and this is the wonder of wonders—
as if he'd trudged along
mounted on oak trees!"
Now, as long as he traveled along sandy places,
all the tracks appeared quite readily in the dirt,
but once he passed beyond the great stretch of sand,
the tracks of the cows and his own
footprints in the harder terrain
became indiscernible; though a mortal man discerned *him*
driving the wide-browed cows in the direction of Pylos.
And, as soon as he'd bedded down the herd in stillness there, he contrived and conducted for himself
a cunning, untraceable itinerary homeward.
Once home, he climbed into his cradle under cover of black
night
in the gloomy cave, so that not even an eagle
keenly gazing

could have spotted him.
He kept rubbing his eyes with his fingers
as he prepared his feast of falsehoods
and, without further ado,
let loose this proclamation:

"I have not seen, I have not ascertained, I haven't heard
from another,
and thus I can't inform *you,* a thing about them,
nor claim a reward for doing so."

When all this had been spoken, Phoebus Apollo sat down,
but Hermes had something to say
and pointed his finger at Kronion Zeus, commander of the
gods.

"Father Zeus, I'll speak to you without concealing anything,
for I am truthful
and do not think to make lies.
He came to us
looking for his slow-footed cows
on a new day
as the sun was urging its own arising.
He introduced no witnesses
from among the blesséd gods
who had seen the business but, declaring his outrage,
gave me orders, with a threat of great constraint,

that he'd throw me into broad Tartaros
which he well can do
since he is in the flower of young manhood
but I came into being only yesterday—
he knows this very well—I am no cattle rustler—
no manner of muscle man—just look at me.
Believe me—for you're supposed to be my father—
that I did not drive the cattle to my home (may I grow
wealthy).
I crossed no threshold (I state this precisely).
I revere Helios particularly, and all the other gods.
I love *you,* and I dread *him.*
You yourself are cognizant
that I am not the cause—
I'll swear a great oath—or better—
By these well-decked porches of the immortals,
the day will come when I'll repay this god
though he be stronger than I am.
In the meantime, you ought to help me because I am
the
younger."

Thus spake the Slayer of Argus from Kyllene,
while slyly glancing about
and retaining his infant's blankets on his arm—
he hadn't got rid of them.
Zeus laughed out loud to observe
how effectively his wily-minded offspring
denied all culpability regarding the cows,
but he commanded the pair of them to seek accord

and together to find the animals, directing Hermes
to put aside his flummery
and lead the expedition
and show the place
where he'd hidden the strong cattle.
The son of Kronos nodded and Hermes concurred,
for the mind of Zeus Aegis-Holder easily prevails.
The two fair offspring of Zeus took off for sandy Pylos
and reached the crossing of the Alphaeus
coming to those fields and high-roofed stables
where strange beasts are cared for by night.

Now as Hermes went into the cave
to drive the strong cows
into the light,
the son of Leto, looking aside, spotted the cowhides
stretched on the steep rock
and put it to Hermes:

"How were you able, you subtle knave, being but a neonate,
to skin two cows? I myself am terrified
at the strength that eventually will belong to you.
No need for you to grow any further at all,
O Kyllenian, son of Maia."

So he spoke, and twisted pliant withies with his fingers.
'Twas Apollo's intent to trap Hermes in a snare
but the twigs refused to ensnare him—
they fell off and landed far away,

and from the spot where they landed sprang up new, intertwining with one another,
entangling, instead of Hermes, the rambling cows,
according to *Hermes'* intent.
And Apollo marveled as he watched it.

Then Strong Argeiphontes examined the locality
with a furtive flash in his eyes
and grew sure that he'd be able
to mollify the worthy son of Leto,
though the latter was ever the stronger.
He set his lyre on his left arm.
He tried each string with the plectrum.
It sounded just fantastic under his fingers,
and Phoebus Apollo laughed for joy.
The lovely sound of the lyre ravished his heart
with ineffable music. As he listened, sweet longing
arose in his soul.

Then the son of Maia, playing sweetly on his instrument,
made bold to stand at the left of Phoebus Apollo
and started to sing—
and the voice that came out was a good voice,
singing of the immortal gods,
how they came into being,
how each was allotted its portion.
First among the deities
he honored in song Mnemosyne,
the mother of the Muses,

for the son of Maia was of her lineage.
Then, according to their ages, the rest of the gods
how each came into being,
striking the lyre on his arm.

But in his heart an unappeasable longing
overcame Apollo
and he gave voice to winged words:

“Slayer of Oxen, Trickster, ever at your work, feast companion,
your music is worth the price of fifty cows,
therefore I think our litigation should be settled peacefully.
Do tell me, though, O ever-resourceful son of Zeus and Maia, did this magical activity of yours
belong to you from birth,
or did some god or human
bestow so wonderfully worthy a gift upon you
imparting godlike song,
for marvelous is this
    newly manifested sonic phenomenon I hear,
which, I say, no mortal or immortal
has ever experienced before, except for you,
O Felon, son of Maia? What skill is this?
What cure for incurable cares? What sort of practice?
For particularly there are implicit in this music
three things from which to choose:
good cheer, good sex, sweet slumber.
I myself am partial to the Olympian Muses—

music for choral dancing, brilliant song, flourishing sounds

and the resounding thrill of flutes.

But I've never been moved by the spectacular agilities of

performers

at young people's parties

as I have by this music now.

I marvel, son of Zeus, at your lovely playing.

Though you are but a little one, you know such glorious skill.

So come, dear fellow, and respect the word of your elders,

for you'll be renowned among the immortal gods,

both you and your mother.

By this javelin of cornel wood, I'll make you a leader

fortunate and famous among the gods,

and give you bright gifts

and not deceive you ever."

Hermes responded to Apollo

still with cunning discourse:

"You question me, O One-who-acts-from-a-distance,

circumspectly,

but I do not in any way deny you

access to my art.

Indeed, I wish to be compliant in thought and word.

You already know all things very well in your heart,

for you are situated first among the immortals, noble and

strong.

Wise Zeus appropriately loves you, has given you bright gifts.

They say that from his words, O Distant-Doer, you have

learned

the prerogatives of the deities and Zeus' oracles to boot;

and indeed the entirety of his divine pronunciamentos.

I myself have gleaned that you've acquired

great wealth in such matters.

So you can learn what you choose, whatever you long for.

Since apparently your heart is set on the lyre,

go ahead—sing! Play on it!

Receive it as a gift from me! Strike up the splendor!

(But remember to give proper credit for it *to* me.)

Sing well while holding this clear-voiced friend in your hands, you are already quite capable of uttering

all that is beautiful and well-composed in language.

Hereafter, with confidence, take it to young people's parties,

to splendid revels, to lovely choral dances,

spreading joy by night and day.

Whomever dexterously inquires

with art and wisdom

of it,

it will instruct with its utterance

in all manner of things delightful to the mind.

It is easily played, with gentle familiarities, but it flees

the miseries of technical toil.

Whoever inquires of it, however, in artless fury
will find it to respond
with lofty-sounding airy fluctuations,
vain expressions,
and just plain wrong notes.
But you can learn what you choose, whatever you long for,
so I will give you that lyre, O son of Zeus,
and I, for my part, will go out and work in the pasture
with wild-ranging cattle
on hills or horse-fostering meadows.
There the cows and bulls will bring forth promiscuously,
abundantly
females and males,
nor will it be necessary for you to hold onto your anger."

So speaking, he held out the lyre
and Phoebus Apollo took it
and freely gave the shining whip to Hermes in exchange
and dubbed him a herdsman.
The son of Maia happily accepted it.
And now the son of Leto, Lord Apollo-who-shoots-from-afar,
setting the lyre on his left arm,
tried each string with the pick,
and it sounded just fantastic under *his* fingers
and the god sang very beautifully to its notes.

Then the two comely offspring of Zeus
returned the cattle to the sacred meadow,
and they themselves hastened
to the snowy peaks of Olympus
taking pleasure in the lyre as they sped.
Wise Zeus rejoiced and joined the two in friendship
and Hermes loved the son of Leto always
and does so even now
having given the lyre as token of friendship to the Far-Darter
who, setting it on his arm, plays it quite well.

Then Hermes himself invented another art—
he made the syrinx—that is, the panpipes—
whose sound can be heard from afar.

But the son of Leto said this to Hermes:

“I fear, O son of Maia, you conductor, many minded,
that you might steal the lyre back from me and take my curved bow as well.
Remember that you’ve an assignment from Zeus
to establish the practice of exchange
among humans down on earth that nourishes many.
And if you take it upon yourself
to swear a great oath of the gods
on implacable Stygian waters
or just by nodding your head,
you would be doing all that you can
to please me and ease my heart.”

Then the son of Maia nodded his head
and took it upon himself never to burglarize
anything belonging to the One-who-shoots-from-afar
and never to terrorize his shrewdly guarded domicile.
And Apollo son of Leto nodded in return
that he'd never be a better friend to another among the
immortals
or god sprung from Zeus or human either.

To seal the oaths, the Father sent out an eagle as an omen
and Apollo also swore:

"I will make of you a symbol before all the immortals
of the trust and honor in my heart. Moreover,
I shall give you a beautiful wand-stick, tri-leaved and golden,
appertaining to boundless happiness and riches,
and to keep you inured against destiny.
It will achieve for you every accomplishment
of words and worthy acts
such as I say that I've learned directly
from the utterances of Zeus.
But as for prophecy itself, about which you ask,
though you are sprung from the divine,
it is not licit that *you* make inquiry into it
—nor any of the other gods either—
for only the mind of Zeus knows that.
And I myself have sworn a mighty oath
that apart from me not any of the gods

whose coming into being is forever
should know the wise-minded counsels of Father Zeus.
And you, my brother, of the Golden Wand-Stick,
do not demand that I declare the oracles
Wide-Watching Zeus devises.
And as regards the humans:
I'll do mischief to one and profit another
utterly twisting the minds of that unenviable species.
But whoever comes to me
guided by the call and flight of proper omen birds
shall enjoy my prophetic utterance and I'll not deceive them.
But whoever trusting idly twittering birds
inquires of my art against my own intent
or whoever seeks to know more than the gods know—
I say that they shall have an errant journey—
though when they make their offerings, I'll still take the money!

"But let me tell you another thing,
illustrious son of Maia and of Zeus Aegis-holder,
messenger-quick-as-death, daimon of the gods:
There exist three holy sisters,
three virgins who exult in their swift wings.
On their heads is a dust of white meal.
They dwell in houses under a ridge of Parnassus—
teachers of divination, independent of myself.
When I was a herds-lad
I practiced their art
though my father considered it not worth his attention.

From their station they flit about, hither and yon,
feeding on honeycombs
bringing each thing to pass.
Eating yellow honey stimulates them
so that when they consume it
they wish to speak the truth;
but withhold from them this sweet food of the gods,
and when they swarm together like raging maenads
they utter falsehoods only.
So I commend them to you.
Make particular inquiry of them
to your heart's delight,
and if you teach their art
to some mortal person,
your pupil will hear in their sound, for the most part, your
response
as fortune falls out."

So he spoke, and from heaven, Father Zeus himself
sealed the intent with his words
and consigned to Hermes command over birds of omen,
glad-eyed lions, white-tusked wild pigs, dogs, sheep,
and all the flocking beasts that the broad earth nourishes.
And he commanded that only Hermes
should be appointed messenger to Hades,
who, though he takes no tribute,
will still give a boon not to be sniffed at.

Thus Lord Apollo favored the son of Maia
with every token of friendship,
and the Kronion added graciousness besides.
Hermes is ever at hand for mortals and immortals,
taking but scant profit,
though still he is the cozener
who cons throughout the night
the species of mortal persons
without prejudice as to his target.

And so to you, this is farewell,
O son of Zeus and Maia,
but I will be mindful of you
and make another song as well.

COMMENTARY ON THE *HOMERIC HYMN TO HERMES*

Hermes and Magic

Hermes's birth is that of a magical child; but the nature of the magical force to which the infant god has access is undefined and nowhere explicitly addressed, though perhaps it is possible to limn certain features of it as moment by moment in the poem the god self-initiates his magical career.

Hermes and his magic are something new in the divine realm. The gods themselves—particularly Hermes's older brother Apollo—are astonished by it: Hermes's strength, his resourcefulness, the instantaneous nature of his magical agility are all unique on the Olympian scene. Zeus himself presumably has such powers, but Zeus's magic does not *amaze* with its thunderbolt: it inspires nothing but terrified abjection.

As for the source of Hermes's magical propensities, the *Hymn* suggests there are qualities native to the Arcadian wilderness where his cave-dwelling mother resides that accrue to the child. Hermes's untutored

possession of them at first enrages the young Apollo but quickly comes to fascinate him. The association of magic with the wild, however, only marks its alienation from the Olympian universe since, by and large, the Olympians will put Hermes's magic to precious little use. The adult Hermes, as a personage in the Homeric epic, is a rather docile figure, limited to running errands for Boss Zeus. If we are to catch a glimpse of the magical background for the Hermetic nature, we must look to the *Hymn to Hermes* for direct evidence.

Here, Hermes's magic and its operations are disconcerting. He bursts upon the divine scene with no sensitivity to divine decorum. He does not behave by the rules: he is a thief and a liar, a breaker of boundaries, even though—as his prehistory outside Olympian convention shows—he is a *god* of boundaries. In Greek antiquity, the god Hermes was represented by a pile of rocks called a *herm,* placed to mark the border between territories. Hermes became, based on this beginning, a god of mediations and of the dangerous spaces between more clearly defined localities, whether geographical, moral, or ontological. Commercial enterprises called upon him for protection, as did healers, sorcerers, cozeners, circus performers, sophists, and, of course, thieves: all persons outside normative constraints, bound by their own laws, always negotiating a space between this and that, skilled in the manipulation of that which cannot be confined or defined by fixed determinations.

In the official myths and poems of the Olympian tradition—the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—there is almost nothing of any of this. Hermes's role as mediator is restricted, as I said, to running errands. His own nature is quieted and limited; his divine prerogatives are reduced. When he performs his more interesting functions, such as conducting the ghost-souls of the slain wooers of Penelope to their place in Hades, he does so without comment or initiative of his own. He has the golden wand he received in the *Hymn to Hermes* from Apollo, but he deploys it only to perform his errands. His typical epithet, far from revealing him as a liar and trickster, is "guileless."

The *Hymn* is something of a memorial to what has been—a world of Hermetic surprise and magical agitation before the authority of Olympus organized the Hellenic cosmos. And yet in it a picture of that magical world survives.

The Tortoise Lyre

But the magic itself and its operations are, as I say, disconcerting. They will not, for instance, be distributed according to Christian sensibilities into white and black species. We don't see under Hermes's provenance the moral dualism of an evil Sauron and a benevolent Gandalf. Hermes's positive contributions to existence are irrevocably intertwined with darker causes, his darker acts not without relation to creative intentions. The inseparability of good and evil is surely a Hermetic theme.

Perhaps Hermes's most affecting ontological intervention is a new type of music or, one might say, a whole new attitude to and within the arts. His first act, even before he makes off with Apollo's cows, is to create a lyre from the shell of a tortoise. Apollo is already a musician, but the charm and depth of what he hears in Hermes's effortless lyre playing makes of music something he had not imagined. A subtly ramified aesthetic attitude is explicit in the interchange between Hermes and Apollo about it. Hermes's music is not an exhibition of technical proficiency or virtuosity. One does not simply appreciate it. One is moved and even transformed by it. It has depths and is both spiritual and personal. For Hermes himself, the lyre is even a kind of oracle:

> Whomever dexterously inquires
> with art and wisdom
> of it,
> it will instruct with its utterance
> in all manner of things delightful to the mind.

Yet the invention of the lyre is itself something of an improvisation. Though Hermes fashions his instrument with exacting craft and deliberation, once he is finished, he is not particularly attached to it. We are given the details of its construction, and when Apollo expresses desire to make its music his own, Hermes gives him the lyre without hesitation, instructing him in the simple principles of its use. Thief and prevaricator though he be, *attachment* is not in Hermes's nature. Antoine Faivre even speculates that Hermes's thievery has more to do with restoring hoarded property to circulation rather than accumulating a stash of his own. His concern is not so much Robin

Hood–like countercultural generosity but instead another urgency altogether: to keep things moving!

And yet the invention of the lyre is fraught with darkness. It required the murder of the tortoise, depicted in the poem in a particularly brutal passage. Hermes "scooped out its marrow with a chisel," as if the poet, in introducing the reader to the Hermetic charm, wished to alert everyone that dark things are at work here. Hermes speaks to the turtle with guile before he slays it, even quoting a famous adage from Hesiod and putting it to vicious use.

However, the Greek word for marrow and for vitality in general is *aion,* a locution that will get enormous metaphysical play from the time of Plato, a century or two later than the *Hymn,* and on into the Hellenistic and Roman imperial period (323 BCE to the Christian appropriation of the Roman Empire by Constantine in 312 CE), when *aion* will mean "eternity" and be deployed in Gnostic, Hermetic, and other magical texts for transmundane and timeless being. (The transcendent realm in Valentinian and other Gnostic systems consists of a *pleroma,* or "fullness", whose personages are called Aions.) And though the likely esoteric link between Hellenic or Hellenistic mysticism and the yoga practices either directly imported from or at least rumored to exist in India, the spinal marrow (the somatic site of the awakened kundalini serpent of a later period of Indian soteriology) is itself linked to the deepest levels of possible experience.

Could it be that the sacrifice of the lovely mountain tortoise by scooping out its marrow far from referring to an act of murder is an esoteric reference to the power of the Hermetic art to move us "to the marrow"? That to enter fully into its mysteries we must indeed renew the entirety of our inner nature by scooping out (or scoping out) our inner being down to the very core—the central nervous system and its autonomic mysteries—so that the magical planes and energies can fully possess, awaken, and renew us?

Certainly not, replies the scholar who has never been moved to explore such an esoteric possibility or to seek it in a context apparently as remote from ancient India as the *Hymn to Hermes*. In a sense that is as it should be. Certainly, as a literary performance, such a reading is not mandated, let alone stylistically or formally called for. And yet when one does inquire into the nature, even in ancient Greek terms, of the plane of magical efficacy to which the divine infant Hermes has instant access, tropes on the

esoteric function of the inner life of the body are not outside the ken of inquiry. No one knows how deep into the past the "technologies of the sacred" that became formalized in later-day yogic traditions existed. And we will have more to say about animal sacrifice in our notes on the *Greek Magical Papyri* later in this book.

On the Practice of Conscious Listening

The subversive, retrograde, or even reprobate nature of poetry lies in its foregrounding the sounds of speech or at least attending to them with utter seriousness—its rhythms, the colors of its vowels, its pacing, its repetitions, its subsemantic sonic contrasts, its abrasiveness, its struggles with matter and form, its harmonies. The formal conventions of poetry in different traditions—meter counted in different ways, rhyme, predetermined alliteration or syntactical repetition—domesticate the fundamentally lawless expressivity of poetic sound and bring those lawless potencies to the service of order, not infrequently directly into the service of the ruling powers of the state. It is imagined that the Indo-Europeans (whoever they were) already supported poets who composed poems in praise of warlords and culture heroes, not to mention gods (Watkins 1995). Praise-for-pay poets—poet laureates—have existed perennially from Homeric bards to Alfred Lord Tennyson or the current fashion of honoring local poets as laureates for states, counties, and municipalities. But always, just below the decorous surface, the unruly, not to say Titanic, forces of sonic expressivity threaten with their "barbaric yawp" (to use Walt Whitman's delicious phrase) its *verse libre* (free verse), verse without rhyme or reason (read meter for reason), its ironies, its enigmas, its assault upon the powers that be in the state, in the soul, in the cosmos. (Think of Alan Ginsberg's "Howl," or Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems,* or Ezra Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," the latter with its thunderous attack on the culmination of Western culture in its Great War (World War I) as "an old bitch gone in the teeth . . . a botched civilization" (Pound 1949).

The meter of Homeric poetry was also deployed by the Delphic oracle—a magisterial oracular voice if there ever was one. But it nevertheless toggled between ontological authority (the Delphic oracle was consulted before state, individual, and religious decisions of the highest import) and subversive irony (the oracle was famous for its ambiguous and misleading pronouncements, occasionally resulting in the ruin of the inquirer).

Oracular poetry—in a sense any poetry claiming inspiration from the gods—compounds the felony against reason by listening so deeply to the sounds of words that figures and meanings break through sonic opacity and force into presence entities whose utterances in themselves do not necessarily yield to sense. The Delphic oracle combined the two modes: extreme irrationality and well-ordered composition. The Sybil delivered her responses as incomprehensible utterances in a trance induced by entheogenic fumes rising from a crack in the earth, but her glossolalia were then interpreted by a priest and presented in lines of dactylic hexameter—the very meter of the Homeric poems.

As soon as philosophical reason attempts to master speech, poetry is reason's natural enemy, and of course the first to call poetry to account was Plato, who saw in it, with some ruefulness, both divine inspiration (in his dialogue *Ion*) and a spectacular licentiousness (in *The Republic*)—a slavish capacity to imitate phenomena that were already mere imitations of realities (the Platonic forms or ideas) the philosopher deemed it the care of thought to attend to. But also an awesome power to stir in its audience emotions and cognitions deleterious to good civic order.

It is difficult to circumscribe—*pace* Plato—what poetry actually attempts and achieves, for the poet's syllables carry the burden of waves of mentation. It is as if the thinkers hostile to poetic practice believed there to be a certain materiality to speech—the vocal noises of which it is composed—and upon the inchoate jumble of such noise, the mind must impose the order of thought, as in Plato's *Timaeus* a god brings worldhood to elemental chaos. But the poet does not allow that the materiality of speech is inchoate, nor take pride in the godlike imposition of intellectual order upon it. Middle-voice inspiration and the sometimes exquisitely ordered music it brings to the ear do not cotton exclusively to rational decorum, as we saw with Hesiod. Yet the poets must *honor* their syllables. They must trust that there is an order to be discerned among them, and within that order intelligible—if not univocally rational—messages await their solicitations. Poets solicit meaning from the sounds by an act of *listening* that is precisely simultaneous with the act of utterance. They gaze (to change the sensuous mode) with an intelligent receptivity into the scrying stone (the crystal ball or magic mirror) that is the very matter of their being.

In the *Hymn to Hermes,* the role of listening is paramount and has oracular powers: Hermes invents music that can be revelation, and late in the poem, Apollo gives him an oracle that delivers its messages through the sound of buzzing bees. Hermes himself stands on the borderline between authority and anarchy, between the chthonic realm of unruly expressivity and the establishment of the rule of law, though law through a power latent in chaos itself. And here, Hesiod's Xaos and chaos find a common ground: a role in giving rise to emergent form. The Muses, who represent a clearly Hermes-like power, "know how to tell many lies and make them sound likely, / And they know, when they wish it, how to sing things that are true." They owe no allegiance to anything but their own expressive power. (In today's cancel culture, the Muses would have to be the first to go.)

If to translate and interpret (*hermeneuein,* or hermeneutics) is a Hermetic function, one practices that function by listening to that which is as often as not barbarous and incomprehensible. In translation, one solicits the mysterious otherness of the alien speech that has yet to yield its meanings (even if it has received innumerable previous readings by translators and interpreters). The modern scholar-poet, such as myself—equipped with dictionaries as speculative tools, which are hardly authorities—waits upon his own intellect, intuition, willfulness, and sensitivity for the impulse to poetic speech to be aroused by the text before him. The Greek text is the scrying stone—the translation, the message from the god.

Self-Reference in the Homeric Hymn to Hermes

Self-reference, in general, returns representation to that which is represented, subverting the duality between word and reference, a duality that stands at the origin of language itself. Hesiod's *Theogony* presents an account of presenting a theogony: the Muses compose a theogony through Hesiod. Similarly, the *Hymn to Hermes* presents a picture of the improvised composition of a Hermes hymn. Hermes sings, to the tune of his lyre, an account of his own begetting and nativity.

But self-reference also snakes within and around itself in a more intriguing and insidious manner. Where a specific moment or swatch of language refers to itself, either to language as such or to the particular swatch of speech it itself belongs to, there forms a loop or infinitely swirling logical circle: the ordinary distinction between a word and the

thing it stands for is set into a spinning impossibility—a preor postlogical state of language where the things of experience are not imitated by verbal representations but instead sparkle with unmediated life. In the moment when one realizes that the poem is talking about itself, one experiences a kind of stereoptic doubling: the poem creates an image of itself that *covers* itself at the same time and in the same place where it *presents* itself—exciting a feeling that the poem and its content are redolent of a primordial magic. For if a represented thing is its own representation, and representation is itself a thing, the split between language and reference is annealed. Language and thing are united not because everything that exists is language but because language exhibits itself as among the things that actually exist.

In the hieroglyphic texts that appear in Middle Kingdom and New Kingdom Egyptian tombs, there are notations in red characters giving special instructions regarding the main text—a veritable metatextual contextualization of the effective magical formulas of the main inscriptions. Jan Assmann remarks that metatextuality is the mark of magic (Assmann 2003, 89ff). Metatextuality inserted in the text itself renders the text self-referenial and intransitive. It opens a double, even a duplicit, space of meaning where magic appears. That which one thought to be a mere picture turns out to be the thing portrayed. Far from mimetic reduplication causing the real to dwindle as in Plato's complaint, it intensifies the sense that language compels reality magically, since right here language is both entity and idea.

Formal logic begins in Greece in the work of Plato, but in its modern development, logic has trouble dealing with propositions that refer to themselves for they tend to lead to loops, regresses, and, most damagingly, contradictions. But it really is the birth of language where logic has its origin, since language introduces not only "making sense" where speech stands for what exists (Kimhi 2018) but also prevarication, depicting where it does not, distorting or contradicting what does, and even uttering utter nonsense—runs of syllables that are grokked as language (see the "Barbarous Names" mentioned in the *Chaldaean Oracles* and exemplified copiously in the *Greek Magical Papyri*) that don't represent anything at all semantically but express directly the energetic and affective force of the stream of utterance itself. Utterance is "outerance," the release of significant energy from what is inside you, both in terms of linguistic

content and psychic force. In general, once speech exists, poetic utterance can cause states of mind to flash into appearance that coherent logic bypasses or covers over.

In general, language allows us to bear in mind that which is not present to the senses and correlatively has the capacity to bespeak "that which is not"—like Hesiod's muses or Parmenides's mortals who spend their days dazzled by their own incoherence. Even a falsehood produces something present to the mind. In language that refers to itself, that which represents (the word) and that which is represented (the reference or content) are reassimilated to each other, as if bringing back together that which language has broken apart. Without abandoning speech, a condition like that, which is prior to language, is induced. If one is sensitive or susceptible to the energies of poetry, the self-referential moment can make one feel as if one were being brought into a magical condition redolent with the beginning of the world.

Poetry from the *Odyssey* right up to late modernists like John Ashbery has taken flight from such magical effects: think of the moment in the *Odyssey* when a court singer named Demodokos—clearly a poet-singer in the Homeric tradition—sings of the Trojan horse in the presence of Odysseus himself. Coleridge in his poem "Kubla Khan" recalls "the damsel with the dulcimer" singing in so magical a mode that her music—the very music that Coleridge dares evoke in his dream-poem—threatens to enchant and ensorcel its hearers so that "all will cry beware beware / weave a circle round him thrice / for he on honey-dew has fed / and drunk the milk of paradise." Or in a less ecstatic mode, Ashbery's various tours de force of self-reflective poetry that seek both to evoke and exhaust poetry's magic. George Quasha has spoken in this regard of what he calls gnosemic language: language that releases in its readers the states of being which it intends, not by semantic reference but by direct induction.[*15]

Further Notes on the Homeric Hymn to Hermes

Here is the Hermetic in the modern intellect: Hermes as sponsor of intellectual penetration gives us modern mathematics, modern physics, modern technology, information theory, modern finance, and so on. Yet Hermes as trickster knows that these clever deployments of intelligence and practical resourcefulness cannot penetrate to the truth of Being or effect a

commodious alignment upon or with it. In mathematics, he sees paradoxes; in fundamental physical theories, irreconcilable theoretical differences; in the technologies that seek mastery rather than harmony, environmental and military catastrophes; in the virtual back rooms of finance, the spawning of clever objects of investment that put at hazard the entirety of our financial arrangements.

Readers with some knowledge of modern logic might consider Kurt Gödel as the supreme agent of Trickster Hermes, for his famous proof showed that the rigorous effort to render a rational system complete renders it inconsistent and requires a further complexification of the system to overcome that; and the effort to render it consistent renders it incomplete. According to Gödelian logic, Hermes has installed himself at the heart of logic itself.

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What is the nature of the divine reality to which Hermes can recur as to a magical resource when he must produce creative intervention? Does it, for instance, lie in his foreknowledge of his own destiny, or is it rather a zone of random possibility to which he can refer by sensing the right moment for shuffling the deck and doing so? Remember that the magic wand with which he is equipped by Apollo (presumably his caduceus) serves to immunize him against destiny, not bind him to a predetermined mythic narrative.

Now, if the gods in general are thought to author destiny, Hermes has to be given the power to escape it by the gods; namely, by Apollo, as in the *Hymn to Hermes*. On the other hand, if destiny is beyond the gods, then the magic that is bestowed upon Hermes puts him beyond beyond—beyond even that which is beyond the gods.

The fact that this rather ultimate power is *bestowed* upon him by another god shows how a given deity can function on various levels, how indeed an undefined divine force or middle-voiced agency flows through and across the gods' being and performances. Apollo says he has unique access to Zeus's mind. Apollo is to be Zeus's sole medium for communicating destiny to mortals through such institutions as the Delphic oracle, or through the gift of being able to read messages in the flight of birds and so forth. Zeus wills the destinies of all things. And yet Zeus, as a personality, is himself subject to destiny. Again: when Apollo notices the

flight of certain “long-winged birds” he “knows” that the new-born infant Hermes is behind the theft of his cows. Apollo is the very principle of prophecy on the one hand; on the other, as an anthropomorphic figure, he must deploy his own oracular technique to divine what is going on. The series—fate, god, narrative, magic—is intransitive: god controls fate, fate controls god, magic grants access to that which is beyond fate, yet it is a god (Apollo) who bestows on Hermes this access to magic.

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The random dimension that is also the milieu of the divinatory apparatus determines happenstance from a vantage that is neither psychological, astrological, nor particularly concerned with identity or destiny. Chance is neutral, cool, indifferent. It does not *compose one’s story,* and yet it is still of a piece with the destiny imposed upon one and from which one might struggle to release oneself. Divination fascinates by yoking chance to destiny and at its best opens the soul to contingency, to a sense of the meaningfulness of come what may. But a truly creative use of divination and the open attitude it fosters requires a certain skillfulness in reading its messages: a willingness to recognize when to accept and interpret chance as an omen—as Hermes shows with the appearance of his turtle or the long-winged birds Apollo reads—or, if one is an artist or poet, an intuition regarding when to accept contingency as pertinent to one’s project and when to let it go by. Openness to contingency, to divine incursion, indeed to Being itself must not manifest as mindless enthusiasm for surface synchronicity, serendipitous coincidence, or the adventitious appearance of apparently relevant symbolic events. Reading contingency and attending to happenstance is a subtle and profound art, requiring a balance between a certain vital skepticism and a consciously focused credulity. Still, for ends beyond life and death—the higher life of pure awareness and unmediated access to Being itself—one must discover one’s own condition smack dab in the middle of ongoing contingency. Whatever happens is one’s mandala; whatever forces are operant in the moment are the specific forces one is given to work with; however, that one’s mind is active already involves the mode of attention just then pertinent to one’s practice. This is Hermes at the crossroads, the liminal region between any two events where the rationality of either fails to define them both and contingency as possibility makes itself available.

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Pausanias tells of a Hermes oracle that worked like this: You walk up to a publicly displayed statue of the god and whisper a question in his ear. Then you stroll back into the crowd and accept the first utterance you overhear as answer to your query. What you hear is a chance occurrence. The fact that you are *listening* already initiates your contact with the god (Pausanias 1971).

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In Greek a *hermaion* is "a windfall."

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Why the cattle of Apollo? In the *Odyssey,* the cattle of the sun god Helios or Hyperion play a certain structural role. That they are violated by Odysseus's starving cohorts seals the sailors' doom. The sun god demands revenge, and the companions of Odysseus are drowned to a man. Hyperion's cattle are guarded by his daughters. It is those daughters who will guide Parmenides's horses "beyond the tracks of the paths of day and night." What are the cows of Apollo? Who or what are the daughters of the sun?

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Mathematics as sacrifice: one sacrifices one's woolly fantasies for the orderliness of collective positivity. But the sacrifice is only satisfied or completed when the entire mathematical project becomes a *noetic mandala* and one's sacrifice is of one's phantom apparencies only as *requiescent unto Being.* What one believes or supposes to be real is accepted only in so far as it can be relieved of its ontological positivity which it offers up to unique, undivided Being itself.

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In the stories of the gods, there are these two aspects: the god figure that appears in poetry and cult worship and the being of the god itself—its godhead or godhood understood to be beyond any such anthropomorphic representations. Gods have self-transformative powers. In the *Odyssey,* for instance, the gods frequently appear by taking over the body of a participant in the scene where its theophany appears in disguise; for example, Athena becomes a man called Mentor, who is well known in Ithaca, to speak to Telemachus (Odysseus's son). Athena as godhead has the power to take on apparent human form. But in the *Hymn to Hermes,* the anthropomorphic

figures show themselves as possessing both aspects. Both Hermes and Apollo interact directly with an old vintner who witnesses Hermes's weird charade of the backward-walking cattle. They are gods as persons, acting on Earth within a mortal context. But at one moment Apollo manifests as both aspects of himself. When the old man tells of having seen baby Hermes driving the backward-shambling cattle, Apollo is alerted to the truth of the old man's story by a chance event of bird augury: he sees a long-winged bird and knows therefrom that the infant shepherd was the newborn son of Zeus, just as if Apollo himself were one of his own prophets who shares in divine intelligence because of a sign—the flight of a bird sent by Apollo himself!

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The power of the god takes on human form through the god's communications to certain privileged mortals—prophets who are granted to read chance events as omens. It pervades and mysteriously overwrites or overrides the natural contingency of happenings in the human world. Chance under the shadow of the god is taken over by revelatory power, contingency becoming necessity by such intervention.

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The acosmic or anticosmic attitude of the Gnostic (but also Christian, Neoplatonist, or Hermeticist in some of their moods) can be thought of as protest not against the world so much as against the configuration of the world under the Olympian hegemony (or the Yahwist one); that is, the cosmos ordered like a family or a state.

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The fragility of divine prerogatives: Apollo fears that Hermes will take back the lyre after Apollo places it upon his left arm as one of his emblems and even fears Hermes will hijack his bow as well, which is his proper insignia. The entire exchange is a negotiation of identities. That Hermes is given the office of establishing principles of exchange for humans suggests the common sphere that embraces both the market and identity.

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What is the sphere that Apollo—the deity of a certain solar rectitude, albeit one with its own devastating quality of the quixotic—shares with Hermes?

Suspicion is that it is locatable in the *Greek Magical Papyri* where Helios (whom Hermes says in the *Hymn* he has a particular reverence for) and Hermes are sometimes invoked correlatively. Helios is an aspect of Apollo, the dark side of the sun, and represents the adventitious aspect of solar hegemony. Helios is "fortune" as in *heimarmene, anangke,* Moira (astrological destiny, necessity, fate): both an iron wheel of fortune that is fully determinate and inflexible but also, simultaneously, chance or luck—the purely adventitious and spontaneous. Hermes—in his spontaneity, creativity, and inventiveness—gives purpose, meaning, pertinence, and value to that which may strike one as unruly and unpredictable.

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Apollo's dark side is attracted to Hermes, and Hermes's pious side—his tricksterism, which glows around the edges with a certain twinklingly radiant numen—feels an affinity for Apollo's strength and positivity.

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It is in the final passages of the *Hymn* that the cooptation of the Hermetic spirit by the Olympian hegemony as well as a glimpse of its deepest autonomy is in evidence. Apollo, on Zeus's behalf, keeps the secret of prophecy and seals it off from Hermes's curiosity while at the same time bestowing upon him, in the form of his caduceus, the very powers that, throughout the rest of the *Hymn,* we have seen belonged to Hermes quite autochthonously. The most telling of those powers for our purposes is the ability to keep the wielder of it "inured against destiny"—a power exactly parallel, as we shall see, to the goal of Hermetic enlightenment in the *Poimandres*.

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The power to remain inured against destiny means that Hermes shall enjoy at any moment the power to turn on a dime and break the compulsory course of his immediate activity.

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Zeus's retention of prophecy to his own counsel (Apollo in this respect is simply that aspect of Zeus) conceals the truth that Zeus himself is subject to a destiny that he cannot see.

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Apollo is the prophetic arm of the Olympian system: the Delphic oracle is his instrument. The *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* tells the story of how he came to possess Delphi by conquering the serpent or dragon that previously haunted the place. But the factor in the divine economy—that destiny exceeds the capacity of prophecy to apprehend it—is something that exactly Hermes is natively familiar with.

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Everything in the poem attempts to draw Hermes's native prerogatives into the Olympian ambit and restate them as boons of Olympus, and yet the materials for a reinscription of Hermes's autonomous access to that which lies beyond the gods are—almost in the same breath—in evidence, too.

THREE

THE "POEM OF PARMENIDES"

INTRODUCTION

Parmenides (ca. 480 BCE) is usually recognized as the beginning of the rational tradition in Western philosophy. He is preceded by some ninety thinkers (Freeman 1978) who over a period of some two hundred years had begun to wrest thinking as such from its poetic contexts in Hesiod and Homer, the early tragedians, the lyric poets, poeticizing statesmen like Solon, and sundry seers and visionaries. The best known of these thinkers are generally called pre-Socratic philosophers because they antedate Plato's teacher and inspiration, Socrates, himself usually credited with opening Western philosophy to its highest possibility. These thinkers apparently took a prominent aspect of what exists—fire, water, air, earth, number, proportionality, flux, language, thought—as suggesting how the *whole* of existence might be characterized. Thus one thinker (Thales) asserted that all is water, meaning to emphasize the fluid character of things in time; another asserted earth as first principle so as to emphasize solidity as the fundamental truth of what is real; Anaximenes speculated similarly about air—that a certain wind-like or spirit-like quality animates all phenomena, even objects and beings that are apparently quite other than air. Pythagoras saw numerical proportionality underlying everything; Heraclitus saw logos —thought and language—as the basis of all, together with watery or fiery flux, the unstoppable transformation of things. Each one proposed what rhetoricians call a metonymy: an image or metaphor in which a part of something is taken to characterize and stand for the whole of it. "All *hands* on deck," shouts Captain Ahab when a whale is sighted. He means all sailors, of course, but just in so far as they will be using their hands to trim the sails and harpoon cetacaeans.

With each pre-Socratic thinker, metonymy is a starting point for elaborating how all things can be accounted for by projecting over all of being the qualities of a metonymical part of it. The significance of Parmenides is that in his poem "all of being" is no longer viewed under a metonymical figure. His principle is Being itself. Being is not a part of itself. It is the whole shebang.

Parmenides himself was, like Solon for Athens and Lycurgos for Sparta, a statesman in his home city of Elea, on the southwestern coast of Italy, today's Velia, but he was also something of a healer-sage, a prophet connected to Apollo, and a giver of a system of laws to his recently founded home city. He wrote, as far as we know, a single poem, fragments of which survive as quotations in later philosophers' works. We possess some 160 lines of hexameter, apparently divided into two sections, the first delivering a way of truth (called "The Way of Truth"), the second a deceptive account of opinion ("The Way of Opinion"). The final lines of "The Way of Truth" seem to suggest that "The Way of Opinion" (which if removed from its context might seem like the work of one more pre-Socratic metonymical thinker) is presented as an example of how *not* to think.

In my view, the actual concern of the poem is to *induce* in the reader the intuition that is Parmenides's vision. Reason, as philosophy will come to understand it (the use of consistent terminology for concept formation and logical argument for persuasion), is put to use in the poem but not deployed exclusively. Every aspect of the poem, not only its apparent argument, plays a part in the induction. The poem is framed by a visionary or dream-like chariot journey; its message is imparted by a goddess. Its subject is, one might say with the Hermes of the *Poimandres,* "everything" but not as a gathering of a vast multiplicity under a single category or metonymical image as with his predecessors. Parmenidean Being is not graspable by sense; it is not conceivable as something existing in time or space; it is not capable of division or internal multiplicity. It is, as he will say (in Fragment 8), indivisible, incapable of coming into being or falling away from being, neither no longer existing in a past nor anticipating existence in a future but "all Now: one—continuous." To bring one's intelligence to the thought of it is, in that very act, to Be it, to be not other than it. Thinker, thought, and thing-thought-of are not divided from one another.

Parmenidean Being expresses the logical essence of all the great mystical traditions in which the individual seeker becomes one with that which she seeks: the famous unio mystica of the Christians; the identity of Atman and Brahman of the Hindus; the Buddha nature of the later Budddhists; the harmony with the tao of the Taoists; and so forth. However, though only Being truly *is,* what we call experience involves an infinite plethora of possibilities for how things might *seem to be*. Seeming or Apparency—the possibility of appearances—are not simply negated or banished from connection with Being, for in another fragment Parmenides's goddess tells him "that everything that seems (and these pervade everything) must seem to be." Apparency is indissolubly linked to Being.

Parmenides's concern is therefore not only with the whole of what is but with the whole of what comes to appearance and, with that, the entire provenance of the mind: its rational, intuitive, imaginative, perceptual, sentient, visionary, and even absurd and maniacal powers. Since all that appears appears to be, its truth is not a selection of true appearances over false ones but obtains at an altogether different and absolutely singular kind of mental apprehension. That Parmenides perceives that the mind entire is prior to and in advance of all its well-developed ways of being used (religion, philosophy, politics, science, technology), but the essence of all these expressions connect his vision with Hermes. For Hermes's intelligence—though capable of infinitely many deployments and developments and of finding itself in everything that comes to appear before it—is integral and whole. It cannot be divided from or within itself with impunity. Its ineradicable connection with "what is" is also a connection with all that seems to be. That connection in principle—the nondual (or indefinitely dyadic) relation between a fundamentally timeless essence and infinitely variable timebound apparencies—renders the Hermetic intellect as transcending and yet supporting the further life of Apparency cum Being, in oncoming times. The mind of Hermes is its own Being—Parmenidean Being itself (according to my configuration).

THE "POEM OF PARMENIDES"

For the "Poem of Parmenides," I consulted two principal texts for my translation of the original Greek: *Parmenides of Elea: A Text and*

Translation with an Introduction by David Gallop, University of Toronto press, Toronto, Buffalo, London 1984; and *The Presocratic Philosophers,* G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1957.

Fragment 1

The mares that are able to take me
as far as I want to travel
had so taken me

once they'd set me down on the Daimon's Way—

for it is *She* that takes the Knower through each town.
Onto such a route had they placed me;
and the knowing horses carried me along it, straining at the reins.
And the daughters of the sun went before us, leading the way.

The axle of the chariot
urged round by eddying wheels attached at the ends
put it in motion
and the axle whistled and shimmered as it turned in the nave while the daughters of the sun sent us into the light
having come out of Night's abodes
and pushed back the veils from their faces with their hands.

Up *there* are the gates of the tracks of day and night
fitted above with a lintel
and below with a threshold of stone

and the openings themselves, high up in the aether,
are closed by mighty doors.
The goddess Dikê holds the keys to them.
And the sun's cunning daughters
used mild speech to persuade her to open the gates.

The gates, when opened, opened on a vast expanse
and the daughters of the sun
drove the chariot and mares out on to it
and the gates were fixed on singing axle hinges.

And taking me by the right hand
she spoke to me thus:

Oh Youth, linked with your mares to immortal charioteers
who have lead you here to my home—welcome.
Since it is by no means an inappropriate destiny
that has sent you forth to travel this path
far from the wanderings of mortals
but a Right and Just one,
it is necessary for you to learn all things—
both the stable heart of well-rounded truth
as well as the notions of mortals—
(and with these there is nothing at all to put your trust in). Nonetheless you shall study such matters also—
how the *things that seem*
(and these pervade everything)
must seem *to be.*

Fragment 2

But come, and I will instruct you.
And you must take back home with you what I say—
whether in fact there are only
these two ways for thought to travel:
Either:
Is
(and also) that *Is not*
is not
(and this is the path of which one ought to be persuaded
for it leads to truth)

Or:
IS not
(and also)
that IS
cannot be.

And I say that this is an unconvincing road—
it doesn't turn.

You cannot know what in fact has no being—
this is impossible
and you cannot speak of it.

Fragment 3

The Same [is] to think IS—and to be.

Fragment 4

Consider things, which, though being far away
are nonetheless certainly present to the mind.
For you shall not cut off being from its continuity
with itself.
It will neither be dispersed from nor contracted within
its kosmos.

Fragment 5

It is all the same to me where I begin
for there shall I return.

Fragment 6

for the other way—the thought “IS not”—canno
It is necessary to know and to say that Being is,
t be.
IS. And “cannot be” IS not.

Think about this.

And now I must dissuade you
not only from taking *that* one of these two courses
but also from another
upon which mortals wander double-minded
not knowing anything
for only ineptitude straightens
the errant thought in their minds.
They are carried along
blind and obtuse—
these utterly astonished ones
this indiscriminate horde—

by whom the “to be” as well as the “not to be”
are thought of as the same
and
at the same time
not the same
and that the track down which everything passes
is backward turning.

Fragment 7

For you are never going to put *this* thought to rest:
that things that are not are.
So urge your thoughts off this duplicit pathway
and don’t let well-worn habit force you down it—

don’t let your eye wander
don’t let your tongue wag
don’t allow your ear to echo aimlessly;
Rather, judge by thought
the much-disputed proof which I have spoken.

Fragment 8

There is only one path left
and that is
“IS.”

And on it there are many indications
that Being is unengendered
that it cannot be broken apart
(for it is whole, without parts),
that Being does not fluctuate,

that it has no end.

It never *was.* It never *will* be. It is all NOW—
one—continuous.

For what sort of engendering can be sought for it?
How and from what source might it have grown?

And do not say and do not think
that it came out of not-being,
for it cannot be said and it cannot be thought
that IS is not.
How might it come to be
and afterward pass out of being?
For if it *came* into being, then IS IS not.

And what need could have driven it to grow
starting from nothing
at some time earlier
rather than at some
later time?

Therefore: either IS
or else IS not
and in either case
completely so.

Nor shall strength of trust
incite anything to come into being
out of not-being

severed from IS itself.

On account of this, therefore, Dikê
neither loosens her grip
so that Being might come into being
or that Being might perish
but she holds fast.

And the crisis in these matters lies in this:
either IS
or IS not.

Now surely it has been decided
according to what is necessary
to abandon the nameless and unthinkable alternative
for a true way *that is* not,
and that the other way: that IS
is real and genuine.

How could IS
afterward pass out of Being?
How might it come to be?
For if it *came* into being,
then it *is* not.

And IS is not also
if IS is only *going* to be.

So the alternative “coming into being” is extinguished
and of “going out of being”

nothing can be discerned.

Nor can Being be segmented
since it is altogether of a single piece.

Nor does it exceed itself or fail to reach itself
thereby disrupting the continuity *of* itself.

But Being is everywhere replete, everywhere continuous
and all of it connected
close
to all of itself.
But without motion
locked within the limit of mighty bonds
without beginning
and not to be brought to an end
(since both “coming into being” and “passing out of being”
have been banished far away by true belief)—
the same in the same remaining with itself
it lies where it is
for strong necessity has locked it in limiting bonds
and imprisons it all about.

Nor is it lawful for Being to remain uncompleted:
Being lacks nothing.
For if it lacked one thing it would lack it all.

Because of this, therefore, to think and the thing thought

are the same thing (namely Being),
for you will not find thought
without the being about which
that thought is uttered.

And nothing is or ever will be outside of what is
since Fate has fastened Being to remain
a changeless whole.

And all the other designations
which mortals have laid down
having trusted them to be true
are only names,

namely: “coming into being” and “going out of being”
and the mixture of the two:
not-being and Being together,
alteration of brightness and color
and change of place.

However, since there *is* an uttermost limit,
Is is fully established on every side
resembling in dignity and mass a well-rounded sphere
equally distributed, balanced in every direction,
for it must not come out somewhat greater in one place
somewhat smaller or more humble in the next
as neither does not-being exist
to prevent it from accosting its like
nor can Being be either more or less than Being
is in one place as over against another place

since all of it is inviolable, equidistant from everywhere
and all of it alike within its bounds.

At this point I terminate
such thought and speech
as you ought to put your trust in
concerning truth.
From here on, learn the beliefs of mortals
listening to the deceitful ordering of my words.

For they set up two forms in their minds for the business of naming
whereas even one form is incorrect.
In doing so they have strayed into errancy.
They discriminate bodily antitheses and set up signs
apart from one another: on this side the bright tongue of flame
being gentle and most light, in all ways the same with itself
and in no way the same with another; and on the other side
in opposition
thick night. Solid. Massive. Bodily.

I speak to you here of what is merely a plausible cosmos
so that no thought of a mortal
may ever get the best of you.

Fragment 9

But since all things have been dubbed “Light” and “Night”
and according to their powers, this pair has been
attributed to various entities,
all is full at once
of light and nocturnal obscurity—
full that is of both—since nothingness
nothing
has a share in.

Fragment 10

You shall know the aetherial nature
and of all the signs in the aether—
and of the inapparent acts
of the pure torch of the spotless sun
and from what it came into being.
You shall learn of the wanderings
of the round-eyed moon and its nature.
You’ll know from whence the encircling heavens grew
and also how Anangke, guiding it, bound it
to hold the limits of the stars.

Fragment 11

How Gaia and Helios and Selene, Aether and the Galaxy, outermost Olympus and the hot strength of the stars
rushed into being.

Fragment 12

For the narrow rings are filled with unmixed fire
and the next ones are full of the night

and a tongue of flame shoots out.

In the middle of this is the Daimoness
who steers all things
and she commands the commingling
and the hateful births of everything
sending the female to mix with the male
and then contrariwise, the male with the female.

Fragment 13

She devised
Eros—absolutely the first of all the gods.

Fragment 14

Night-shiner—about the earth
wandering
—an alien light

Fragment 15

always straining after the rays of the sun

Fragment 15a

water-rooter

Fragment 16

According to the disposition of bodily parts—
the limbs that wander everywhere
is the mind
present in persons.
For the nature of the limbs which thinks in persons

is the same in all and each.
And the full
is thought.

Fragment 17

On the right sides—males

on the left sides—females
(sides, that is, of the womb

Fragment 18 (Latin fragment)[*16]

Whenever a woman and a man
commingle the seeds of Venus from their veins,
a formative power will fashion a well-formed body
from that double blood,
observing tempered proportionality.
But if while the seeds mix,
their potencies quarrel
and fail to model a unity
out of this mixed body, fiercely
will they vex the issue (of that distempered “union”)
with ambiguous sexuality . . .

Fragment 19

Thus according to opinion,

these things gestated and now exist
and hereafter they shall grow and later perish.

And for each of them humans have established a distinct name.

COMMENTARY ON THE "POEM OF PARMENIDES"

Parmenides as Mystic

Though there are several authors that take Parmenides as I do as a contemplative, the more common view is to treat his poem as expressing less mysticism-friendly positions. Alexander P. D. Mourelatos offers a series of objections to any soteriological reading of Parmenides. I paraphrase Mourelatos's points here (2008, 44–45) and then respond to each of them:

1. The poem lacks any hint of worship.
2. As for "mystery," that is exactly what the goddess intends to dispel: she explains everything; her logos is thorough-going argument and proof.
3. Parmenides does not hint of translogical mysteries.
4. There is no premise of a peculiar final illumination to be achieved "like a flash," inexpressible in discourse.
5. Nor can we honestly read a message of "salvation" in the poem.
6. The imperatives issued by the goddess are: "listen and carry the word," "look," "restrain your thought," "judge for yourself," "learn."
7. There is not the slightest indication that the imperatives bear on our *bios,* or our *prattein,* our life-career.

One must answer these in terms of how one experiences the meaning of Parmenidean Being. If Being is undivided, I myself am not divided from it. To grasp this intuitively and decisively, though this is by no means accomplished by mere discursive assent, does not require a flash of illumination in addition to that intuition in order to effect the unio mystica. If Being is indestructible and uncreated, so am I. There is no need to mention salvation as such, since *what* is to be saved is inseparable from Being itself. The mystical path is entirely one of gaining the essential insight.

No more than the fact of the goddess's authority is needed to provide a context for something like worship. What worship or soteriological promise

could exceed the content of the recommended cognition itself? And, by the way, the logos in number 2 and the imperatives in number 6 are all matters of course, for many Buddhist traditions.

As for "mystery" and "logic," logic as such does not yet exist. What seems to be an *argument* here is part of the means of inducing the vision of the text, it does not exclusively comprise it. Mystery doesn't exclude clarity or the will to clarify one's thought. It recognizes that there is a beyond to what can be accomplished by such means.

Everything That Seems Must Seem to Be (from Fragment 1)

how the *things that seem*
(and these pervade everything)
must seem *to be.*

The above lines are a translation of *ta dokounta panta per panta chrên dokimôs einai.* The Greek is difficult and has given translators so much trouble that many of them read like gobbledeegook in their effort not to render this utterance so that it does not contradict itself. For instance, Harold Tarrant translates it as "how appearances, which pervade all things, had to be acceptable." Mourelatos has it as "how it would be right for things deemed acceptable to be acceptably: just being all of them together." *Chrên* is "necessarily." *Ta dokounta* are "the things that seem or appear," plural participial form of *dokein* (to seem or appear) used substantively. *Dokimôs* is an adverbial form from the same verb. It would translate as something like "in the manner of seeming." *Einai* is the present infinitive of the verb to be. A full literal translation would be (according to me) something like "the things that appear (and these are all things through all things) necessarily exist in the manner of existence peculiar to appearing." I have used in my journals the phrase "everything that seems must seem to be" as a succinct expression for my reading of that line and choose to give it here.

That **Is (***from Fragment 2***)**

But come, and I will instruct you.
And you must take back home with you what I say—
whether in fact there are only

these two ways for thought to travel:

Either:

Is

(and also) that *Is not*

is not

Or:

IS not

(and also)

that IS

cannot be

The word "Is" is a translation of *esti* (cognate Latin *est*), which is third person singular of *einai,* "to be." The temptation in many translations has been to supply a subject for is and translate the phrase as "it is." This of course inaugurates an inquiry for what "it" refers to. But the Greek does not have a subject, and the grammar of the phrase is exceedingly odd. It seems to be the case that *esti* is being used as a noun, or functions as a kind of verbal act of direct presentification, a direct pointing to that which it signifies. Not *it is,* just *is*. This quasi-nominal use of *esti* persists throughout the poem.

To Think IS (from Fragment 3)

The Same [is] to think IS—and to be.

The Greek is *to gar auto noein esti te kai einai.* Fragment 3 is usually translated "for to think and to be are the same." Or more literally but more obscurely: "The same is to think and to be." The fragment is usually taken to authorize idealistic ontology and to be the original version of the Berkeleyan "to be is be perceived."[*17] But the use of *esti* as if it were a noun in Fragment 2 and elsewhere renders it questionable that *esti* in Fragment 3 is the copula (connecting word) joining *to gar auto* ("for the same") with *noein* ("to think" or "to know") and *einai* ("to be"). In any

case, “to think and to be *are* the same” can’t be right, since if *einai* and *noein* were the subject, *êsan* (third person plural) rather than *esti* would be required. My idea is that the odd deployment of *esti* as a noun carries over from Fragment 2 to Fragment 3 and that therefore, rather than functioning as the copula, *esti* is the *object* of *noein*: *noein esti:* “to think or to know IS.” The fragment now translates: “For the Same [is] (unexpressed copula) to think (or to know) IS—and to be.” Now, since later fragments insist vigorously that *esti* or *einai* or *on* must be indivisible, the object of thought cannot be plural, so the sense of “to know or to think IS” cannot mean that “whatever one thinks of” and “whatever is” are the same, the common assertion of idealistic ontology. What then? *noein* does not refer to *whatever* one thinks of at all; rather, it indicates the unique act of mind wherein intelligence cognizes the singular and unique meaning of *esti*—IS or Being itself. In that act of mind and only in that act are being and thinking the same.

Indications (from Fragment 8)

> *There is only one path left*
> *and that is*
> “—is.”
>
> And on it there are many indications
> that Being is unengendered,
> that it cannot be broken apart
> (for it is whole, without parts)
> that Being does not fluctuate,
> that it has no end.
>
> It never *was.* It never *will* be. It is all NOW—
> one—continuous.

“Indications” is my translation of *sêmata.* As the word *sêmata* means “signs” (as in *semiotics*), *sêmata* is frequently rendered as “signposts.” What follows in Fragment 8 is then treated in various commentaries as if

what follows *were* those signposts. But the text doesn't say that what follows are the indications but rather that there are many indications *to the effect that* what follows is the case. The series of negative predicates that follow and that characterize *esti* are not exclusive attributes that define IS but are simply thoughts describing *esti* suggested by the *many signs* (not necessarily limited to the listed predicates). It is my opinion that everything in the "Poem of Parmenides" is such a sign, not only the apparently logically structured argument or the explicit abstractions and imperatives the text provides. The visionary journey, the goddesses, the use of hexameter, the odd grammatical locutions—all are indications, signposts. Signposts pointing to what? To what we would call an intuition of the unique thing that is the culmination of Parmenides's journey "beyond the tracks of the paths of day and night" on which the goddess furthers him—the journey to the singular intelligential cognition indicated in Fragment 3 where the dualisms that make up the arrant mortal path that the later fragments describe do not apply.

The One

If one follows Plato's characterization of Eleatic thought in his dialogue *The Parmenides* in which an aged Parmenides and his disciple Zeno (of Zeno's paradoxes fame) are interviewed by a young Socrates, Parmenides's "thesis" will be an absolute Monism, where the One is taken as ultimate and fundamental. But the "Poem of Parmenides" says nothing of the kind. Fragment 8 is the only place where *hen*—"one"—is mentioned, and it is an adjective, not a noun: it is not "*the* One" but its sense is this: that the only path for thought not excluded is one (and) continuous; that is, it is not nothing and it is not many.

Hen's conjunction with *suneches*, another adjective (literally "together-having") exactly parallel the Latin *con-tineo*—actually opens for Western thought the idea of being itself as a continuum, an undivided whole; but again, in Parmenides this is not reified. Parmenides does not identify Being as either *the* One or *the* continuum. He offers the notion as part of a complex panoply of figures to point the mind to its own identity with/as Being itself. Being is undivided. There are no gaps within it; hence, it is continuous.

Actually, even Being is not reified, for though Parmenides will wax sarcastic about how mortals wander double-minded, he himself uses a multiplicity of words to suggest that which the tradition has identified as Being: *einai, on, esti, pelenae, emmenai*. Even in the line where he complains about multiplicity, he uses a multiplicity of terms to indicate his alternative. That there is a deep discursive irony here should not go unnoticed.

In any case, that which is "one, continuous" is also, by virtue of the appearances that it takes on or which take it on, infinitely "divisible," though not in truth "divided." It is like, as we will see in a minute, the mathematical continuum itself that will evolve in part because of Parmenides's proclamation.

All NOW

I do want to comment here on the NOW that adorns the following lines from Fragment 8:

> It never *was.* It never *will* be. It is all NOW—
>
> one—continuous

Parmenides notices something about Being that should be obvious but which for most of us most of the time goes utterly unobserved and unreflected upon; namely, that though the Now is the very heart of concrete actuality, and actuality is nothing if not continuously transitory, the Now itself neither changes nor is capable of being analyzed and dissected into any properties other than its nowness. That which appears as what is occurring *presently,* of course, shows an endless parade of apparent properties which arise, hang around for a while (like William James's "specious present"), and disappear. One can specify such properties as one cognizes them; and the efforts of Plato and the twenty-five hundred years of philosophers since, to provide an ontology for them, proceed apace even today. For the "properties" that are thought to make up passing phenomena (and the linguistic and logical "predicates" that index them) tantalize with lucidities but also paradoxes and puzzles, not to say enigmas. For these properties look like atemporally persistent forms, ideal signifieds, Platonic ideas, universals, mathematical invariants, the "possibities" of Ludwig

Wittgenstein, the "eternal objects" of Alfred North Whitehead, Edmund Husserl's "enormous" eidetic a priori—the many terms in the history of philosophy for entities whose existence, though obtaining only through the transitory objects that they characterize, themselves seem to inhabit an eternal realm, or at least a quasi-universe of quasily atemporal elements of discourse. It is remarkable that variations on the idea of Plato's eternal forms have to be accounted for in virtually every philosophical school. They constitute, according to me, a realm of pseudoor quasi-atemporality. They delay or partially suppress their transitory character as actual mental events but "stay put" for thought so that our awareness of them can "hang out" with them, as if we ourselves could abide on their authority, outside of the radically transitory condition of material existence. Concrete existence brings us up short, for the quasi-atemporality of properties, thought, and language are impotent before the concrete transiency we also experience as time.

But the Now is not transitory. It does not vanish with the vanishing parade of phenomena and their fuzzily evasive quasi-atemporalities. The Now sits at the center of time, as the very condition of concrete existence, and yet it does not move as time seems to flow on. This atemporality is no abstract form, off somewhere in an acosmic Platonic paradise, or at large in an imaginary world of discourses where thinkers vie for hegemony over the discursive spaces of their various disciplines and their specialized expertise. The Now is authentically eternal in a sense that the eternities that follow from Platonic metaphysics do not discern. Eternity. Not a changeless paradise of static otherness or unchangeable interrelationships. Being itself, "unstopped and unproduced" "a treasure that faileth never" (Lansing 2009b, 178)—indestructible, inapparent in itself, but the concrete soul of all apparencies.

Resembling "a well-rounded sphere" (from Fragment 8)

> However, since there is an uttermost limit,
> IS is fully established on every side
> resembling in dignity and mass a well-rounded sphere
> equally distributed, balanced in every direction
> for it must not come out somewhat greater in one place

somewhat smaller or more humble in the next
as neither does not-being exist
to prevent it from accosting its like
nor can Being be either more or less than Being
is in one place as over against another place
since all of it is inviolable, equidistant from everywhere
and all of it alike within its bounds.

The image of the sphere frequently captures the imagination of readers of Parmenides, and I do not wish to discourage or decommission the quite serious imaginal play that it inspires. But I caution against the reduction of Parmenides's concern for Being to that image; as if by exploring the sphere's emblematic possibilities, its somatic secrets, its transcultural affinities, one were circumscribing what Parmendies must have meant. The sphere has to be experienced as an element in the radical diagram of terms and poetic events that is the entire poem. In context, the sphere is given in a simile. The goddess does not say Being *is* a well-rounded sphere, suggesting perhaps a cosmological image, but that it is *like* one. So the entire inquiry should be focused on the other side of the analogy: What is it that is like a well-rounded sphere?

The analogy would be the following: just as every point on the surface of a sphere has the same relation to its center, that relation being its equidistance from the center as measured by the radius; so every *appearance* shares a similar relation to Being. No doubt the symmetries of a geometrical sphere or all-encompassing character of a cosmic one mass suggest the fixity with which the "mighty bonds" of fate and logic guarantee Being's invariance. Its "dignity," no word for which appears in the text, is nevertheless implied: there is no variability in value or valor among Being's apparencies. Being's invariant properties are not essentially material or geometrical, but axiological—evaluative. The equidistance of radii corresponds to the equal value of every apparency vis à vis its relation to Being.

That Parmenidean Being can be explicated as the essence of a unio mystica in which an essential connection, rather than an essential *opposition,* between an ultimate principle and the apparencies that both

express it and, if taken literally, betray it. That Parmenidean Being can be so explicated allows Parmenides's text to stand behind Hermeticism as its ontological secret.

FOUR

EGYPT

ETERNAL EGYPT

> *It is difficult to put the Pharaohs into chronological order because the record for each Pharaoh is dated from the year one, as if time radiated from a contemporary and eternal center—starting time new with each Pharaonic era.*
>
> MONTET 2000, XVII

Open any book on ancient Egypt and you will encounter assertions of a certain eternity or timelessness. The life of the pharaoh changed so little from dynasty to dynasty that Pierre Montet states, almost in frustration, that in drawing a portrait of such a life one can make use of information from records thousands of years apart with impunity. What is true for the pharaoh, it is said, is true for the life of the people. The same things happened year after year, age after age.

Egypt itself is a sign of timelessness—an incursion of a single thought or a single possibility of Being—formed with such integrity and power that it continued to project itself for 3,000 years and even resonates today more than 2,300 years after the history of ancient Egypt is said to have come to a close. After the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great, Egypt was governed by a pseudo-dynasty whose pharaohs were not Egyptians but Greeks and later Romans.

All the salient features of Egypt are redolent of eternity in the sense of timeless being—being for which the creative and destructive characters of the passage of time are irrelevant or simply nonexistent. And yet the appearance of eternity for a being living in time takes form as

changelessness, longevity, monumentality, imperturbability. Think of the Great Sphinx near the Pyramids at Giza, the pyramids themselves, the mummification of the dead, the monumental statuary, the maintenance of the same system of hieroglyphic inscription and sculptural forms for three millennia.

This changelessness is unlike that which must have been true for countless tribal peoples, blessed with only marginal contact with neighboring tribes. The changelessness of the Egyptians is not the inertial consequence of a failure to interact with alien cultures. It was an incursion of timeless eternity that occurred in proximity to the other emerging Near Eastern civilizations—Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Persian, Hebraic. We can say that the changelessness of Egypt is precisely a *historical* changelessness, but this *history* is not only Egyptian history but also eternal Egypt's ontopoietic pressure on the civilizations contemporary with and geographically adjacent to it—civilizations that progressively concerned themselves with their own past and development, in short, their histories. Egypt radiates a timeless reality precisely where other nations project chronology, the march of events, growth and decline. Egypt, of course, undergoes changes in spite of its changeless monumentality: dynastic struggles, foreign occupation, colonial adventures, internal rebellions, foreign wars. But Egypt as a *form of eternity* projects a constancy over or in spite of these internal changes and historical transformations—and in doing so stands out from cultures all too aware of the passage of time.

The event of the incursion of eternal Egypt even upon its own time—say at the beginning of the pharaonic dynasties—does not mark the beginning of a historical process, for it deters the formation of the idea of such a history, but it also does not mark the end of a golden age from which later times are thought to have degenerated. It is nothing other than a declaration of a single, inscrutable warning or a momentous question. This question is not unlike what the Greeks felt in relation to the riddle of the sphinx that confronted Oedipus in Sophocles's drama. Because this incursion is more than a fact, idea, or measure, it is impossible to codify under such rubrics. The incursion of eternal Egypt into human experience and onto the ontological scene of timeless Being is excessive, indifferent, radically present, both immanent and transcendent, and impending . . . like the terrible Egyptian Eye of Horus that being outside time sees everything that happens in time and protects its own.

EGYPT AND GREECE

This presence or pressure of Egypt particularly on Greece manifests narratively in our earliest classical Greek text, Homer's *Odyssey*. It is indicated in the traditional biographies of important early Greek thinkers. It is mentioned explicitly by Herodotus (ca. 485–425 BCE) and in several different contexts by Plato. With the Hellenistic and Roman periods, a veritable confluence of Greek and Egyptian modes of thinking, imagining, and religious practice occurs as Greek-speaking Egyptian intellectuals emerge particularly in Alexandria in the Nile Delta. Plotinus, the most important Platonist after Plato himself, was an Egyptian. Egyptian cults of Sarapis and Isis spread throughout the Roman Empire, and the earliest texts of alchemy appear in Egypt—written in Greek.

When Odysseus's son Telemachus visits the court of Menelaos in search of news about his father (still not back from the Trojan War ten years after his Trojan horse ended it), he meets Helen, Menelaos's wife, resettled in Greece after her sojourn with the Trojans. She appears as a fully trained sorceress, providing entheogenic potions to charm and easeher young guest from Ithaca. In some developments of her story, Helen herself spent the war in Egypt, while only her phantom accompanied Paris to Troy. (This story is developed by Hilda Doolitle [H.D.] in a passionate book-length poem of the past century, *Helen in Egypt*.) In the *Odyssey,* Menelaos himself tells the story of his encounter with Proteus as taking place off the Egyptian shore, thus associating Proteus's clearly Hermetic powers as a shape-shifter with his proximity to Egypt.

Herodotus tells us that the Greeks received their gods from the Egyptians; Pythagoras and other sages were said to have been trained in Egyptian wisdom by Egyptian temple priests; and later Platonic philosophy qualifies its own gravity by associating its concepts with an Egyptian provenance. But most importantly, first with Parmenides and a few generations later with Plato, the concept of timeless eternity determines an ontology that will influence directly the three monotheistic religions and continue to "tease us out of thought," as John Keats put it in his poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn," even today. Iamblichus (245–325 CE), the Neoplatonist of the third century CE who reintroduced ceremonial magic, or theurgy, into the Platonic curriculum, though himself from the Syrian city of Apamea, composes the most complete text we have from him—*On the Mysteries*—

under the pseudonym of an Egyptian priest. And as we shall see, the figure of Hermes Trismegistus, with whom a vast library of writings (only a handful of which have come down to us) evolves on Egyptian soil. Finally, the alchemist Zosimos of Panopolis was most likely an Egyptian artisan priest, trained in metallurgy at temple workshops. Panopolis (today's Akhmim) was the ancient Egyptian city sacred to the god Min, Egypt's Pan.

The Greeks since at least Herodotus had identified their Hermes with the Egyptian god Thoth, a figure of immense dignity in Egypt. He not only establishes Egyptian religion, creates the Egyptian systems of theology, cosmology, orthography, and art, and instructs in other culturally essential skills and procedures—architecture (pyramids) and embalming (mummification), for instance—but is the deity who fashions the cosmos itself in a form that his arts commune with essentially. Thoth is the heart—that is, the intelligence—of Re, the very mind of the sun.

THE PRIEST IS THE GOD FOR WHOM HE OFFICIATES

In Old Kingdom Egypt (ca. 2613–2181 BCE) the pharaoh and the priests were, in their knowledge and practice, the very gods upon whom they attended. They were known by names and epithets that belonged to the gods.

> The priest of Khnum was called "he who shapes bodies," because, before each birth, Khnum fashioned the child and the child's protective genius on the potter's wheel. Of the two priests of Thoth, one was called "the bald," because the ibis was bald, while the other was "he who separates the two companions," because that was the part played by Thoth in the dispute between Horus and Seth. (Montet, 2000, 146)

But this would have meant that, as gods were associated with processes and events, the priests would have been felt to be the agencies that produced or sustained them. The priests of the feline deity Sekhmet, for instance, would know and perform the formulae for causing and removing

plagues and epidemics, so no doubt the priest *was* the god known to be the wielder of such an awesome potency. So, too, the annual rising of the Nile or indeed the daily rebirth of the sun were consequent upon sacerdotal ceremony. The natural order itself was intertwined with priestly action. The Egyptians thought that their ceremonies were necessary for the orderly functioning of the entire cosmos, as if Egypt metonymically were the whole world—pushing the ethnocentrism that is almost universal among tribes and nations to a unique extreme. In the one Latin text in the *Corpus Hermeticum* (*Asclepius*) in which the fall of the system of Egyptian religion is foretold, the text thinks that Egypt's demise will signal the coming of the end of the world.

The use of our English copulas *was, is,* and *will be* have a special sense when we apply them to the relationship between a god and the person who, in exercising the god's function, "is" him. That *is* is not a verb in the present tense; it is asserted timelessly.

THE WORLD AS INSCRIPTION

In Egypt it is almost as if the identity of things were everywhere inscribed upon them. Objects were enshrined in the hieroglyphs as images that betokened them. An object in its actuality would be perceived as an image. Hieroglyphic image and actual object were intimately identified. To see an image would be to be in the presence of an object; to recognize an object would to be in the presence of a text. Writing was of such ubiquity that it reached critical mass and would have been seen even where it wasn't—at least, that would have been the effect in the vicinity of temples where writing crawled over all surfaces.

Because gods were embodied everywhere by statues and images, by hieroglyphic writing on tomb walls and stelae, by the presence of priestly men, as well as whenever the phenomena to which the gods gave rise occurred, the gods were continually in evidence. Immanence was all. You didn't believe in the gods. You believed in your eyes. And everything that you saw would be understood through the sacred images, objects, and narratives that defined them.

Gods were everywhere, and wherever experience identified intensity or identity, new gods might spring into apparency. Egypt was from early on divided into forty-one districts or nomes, and each one had its pantheon. The central Egyptian authority—the house of the pharaoh—was *syncretic* by necessity. It had to represent an overarching divine principle that nevertheless gave place to local gods. Its theology had to account for how divinity itself flowed into the gods of Pan-Egyptian provenance, gods like Re, Osiris, Isis, Set, Thoth, Hathor, and many many others. Such issues were of constant hermeneutic interest.

The unlimited multiplication of deities saturated the Egyptian world, creating a divine space, a continuum of divinity, articulating eternity and causing eternity to saturate, articulate, and fill the world.

THOTH

In regard to Thoth one could say that to each process, phenomenon, and function, its god was ascribed; to every god, its hieroglyph; to every hieroglyph, its ceremony of inscription. And at every ceremony of inscription Thoth is present. This bespeaks the exalted status of the god whose provenance was writing.

The ibis was the bird of Thoth. In one of his glyphs, Thoth has the head of that bird. The Egyptians mummified ibises and provided them with golden sarcophagi. In Hermopolis, the Greek name for the funereal city (the necropolis) where mummies dedicated to Thoth were housed, literally *four million* mummified ibises have been excavated (Copenhaver 1992, xiii). Let the image of this settle in or unsettle in you. Do not seek its hermeneutics too readily. Four million mummified ibises. In golden cases. There is one such gilded ibis coffin in the Egyptian section of the Brooklyn Museum in New York City, exquisitely crafted. The mind of Egypt. Millions of these.

• • • • •

The cities of the dead were sites from which the very character of *life* was projected. In the assimilation of the individual spirit (its birth, life, death, underworld dismemberment, rebirth) to the diurnal journey of the sun (the journey depicted in the tombs of the pharaohs), you have a fully articulated ontology.

Ceremony was *productive* ontology. *Ontopoiesis*. It summoned into being the matter of its liturgy: ethics, absorbed by ceremony. The being of each thing was prescribed by its inscription and sustained by its distinctive rite. The articulation of the space of the gods was simultaneously the articulation of a worldly ontology, and the first instance of a "space of literature" (Blanchot 1989), a world inscribed in a text, albeit a text whose pages were tombs and stones.

What Parmenides would focus as Being itself was in Egypt the divine space, indifferently the space of Egypt, that is, the world. The eternal fact of the space of the gods was that which the phenomena of existence itself put into immediate evidence. But the means for sustaining phenomena in their eternal prospect was hieroglyphics: sacred writing. (Not all Egyptian writing was hieroglyphic, only that which served this function. The priests had a cursive script known as hieratic for other concerns.)

Thoth, the god of inscriptions, was thus the god associated with the being—the identity—of each and every identifiable thing.

OUR WORLD AS COUNTER EGYPT

We live under a counter Egyptian time and temporality, a wildly desacralized and largely suppressed *incapacity* for hearing eternity in temporal extendedness. For us, the maximum spans of time for which we are able to project plans and intentions continue to diminish. We in fact must use force and calculation to bind ourselves to any future whatsoever. We expect without doubt that the world into which we will introduce our progeny will be utterly other than our own and will change in turn before their very eyes. We no longer know what skills are necessary or appropriate for their survival or prosperity. Our institutions institutionalize volatility itself. The most powerful of them—the corporations—must limp from quarter to quarter, and their officers, even with their hypertrophic paychecks, must obey an artificially regulated seasonal rhythm and are powerless for the most part to enforce long-term goals when the latter run afoul of the bottom line and its quarter-annual measure. Long-term processes—the progress of technology and the long-term research and theoretical directions of science—seem driven by a will of their own; that is, by no will at all. The constancy that directs them is so far from having a

godlike or even an ontological basis that it is generally countenanced with a querulous shrug. Compare the time of the building of the pyramids: the dedication of an entire population, its extraordinary physical and bureaucratic resources, to a project that not only took vast quantities of concentrated time but *imagined its result as embodying eternity*.

Our scientific enigmas—black holes, dark matter, dark energy, the impossibility of recognizing the Now in physical theories,[*18] the nature of consciousness—are not honored as evidence of a timeless mystery but as recalcitrant phenomena that need to be studied and explained, as problems to be solved. The origin of the universe and the nature of consciousness are treated as if the solutions to their mysteries required nothing more than sufficient research funds and appropriate experimental apparatuses.

The transitory so eclipses the timeless that it is simply obvious that the Now in which we always find ourselves is as much an eternal and changeless reality as it is the fleeting content that it harbors.

THE CONTINUUM

The dominant philosophical current during the later period of GraecoEgyptian interaction (the Hellenistic and Roman imperial period) was the synthesis of Greek thought that grew on Egyptian soil in Alexandria, inaugurated by Plotinus and known today as Neoplatonism. The structure of this synthesis reflects itself in various ways in the religious cults and theologies developed during this time and subsequently in the three monotheistic faiths.

The Neoplatonic structure of ultimate reality has three hypostases—three levels that literally "stand under" (*hypo* means "under," *stasis,* "standing") all that appears to exist. The first hypostasis is the One or the Good, the ineffable source that is itself beyond being, beyond the articulation of properties for it, and hence beyond the forms that, though flowing from it, cannot describe it. The second hypostasis is *nous,* the mind or intellect, and it comprises the forms themselves and the mind that knows them. This is the realm of Being, the true identities of things gathered in an eternal system of perfectly harmonious relations. The third hypostasis is the

psyche, or soul. It mediates the forms to the world of time, temporal occurrences, transitory objects, and sense perception.

The Neoplatonic noetic hypostasis (the realm of Platonic ideas or forms), though comprising distinctions between the ideas that it contains and thus between the living principles, the minds that are the knowers of these ideas, remains completely unified, all in all and all in each, the way a classical mathematical system exists as an ideal totality, each theorem being implicated in the whole and the whole being implicated in each theorem. The nous carries the unity of the ineffable One into a unity in multiplicity. The indivisible, divided. The nous in this way is like a mathematical continuum—the space of all possible geometrical spaces and all the numbers, natural, rational, and real. The continuum is capable of and indeed requires transfinitely many ways of dividing it in two, that is, it has transfinitely many distinctions that in sum constitute the whole, while the whole itself is, paradoxically, utterly smooth, devoid of difference and distinction. But though the Greeks discovered this totality in the mathematical realm, its essential property—the equivalence of continuity with infinite difference—was already a characteristic of the realm of the Egyptian gods. If Thales said "the world is full of gods," it was an Egyptian world to which he was referring! Not, of course, explicitly but implied in the intuitions registered everywhere in the palpable eternity of Egypt's material and complexly articulated culture. But in Greece, Parmenides will be practically the only thinker to have grasped eternity in *its indivisible yet infinitely divided essence.*

In Plato the articulation of the complexity of the noetic realm—the continuum in its divisible rather than its smooth aspect—will hold onto eternal changelessness for the forms as a remote and specialized vision appropriate to the guardians or philosopher kings of his model republic, and even to them only for limited contemplative sessions, eternity given a nod, but actually removed from the elaborate experience of the world. In Aristotle, the noetic realm is no longer ontologically separable from that which instantiates it. For the Egyptians, however, eternity is immediacy. The transcendent is immanent. The gods are now and here.

I would call attention to the continuum as an abstract mathematical concept that is prefigured in Parmenidean Being and Egyptian eternity and that today can be seen to have the following properties: it must contain an

infinite number of points. It can be construed in such a way that every conceivable “property” attributable to whatever comes to appear can be indexed by a unique point in it. If all the points are accounted for, there will be no gaps between them. If all conceivable properties are accounted for, the space that contains them will be continuous. The continuum articulates the paradox that as smooth it is undivided, but that it can only be so by containing transfinitely many points, each one of which breaks the continuum into two distinct parts. If one thinks of Parmenidean Being as being in itself whole and indivisible but nevertheless capable of allowing everything whatsoever that might come to appearance to do so, the continuum nicely models Parmenidean Being. The continuum’s paradox that infinite divisibility is necessary to its indivisibility parallels Being’s indivisible inapparency as coessential with its allowance of unlimited appearances.

Now, in the modern theory of the continuum, each point can be constructed as the limit of an infinitely converging series. For instance, in the infinite series of sums of fractions, each member of which divides the previous by two (½ + ¼ + ⅛ and so on), after an infinite number of such divisions, the series adds up to—that is, converges upon—the number 1 as its limit. Every number, including every irrational number, can be represented as the limit of such a convergent series. This is the basis for one of the paradoxes of Zeno of Elea. Zeno was a disciple of Parmenides and developed his proofs to demonstrate Parmenides's thesis that Being is indivisible. Exactly how much of this mathematics was familiar to the Egyptians we do not know. They seemed, however, to have grasped intuitively the relation between continuum and eternity, a relation with which the Pythagoreans will be forced to reckon. But the idea of an infinite series converging on a point or real number—a notion essential to the understanding of the continuum—was inscribed in one of Egypt's most mysterious and sacred symbolic images, the terrible eye, the parts of whose hieroglyph can be read as just such a convergent series: ½ + ¼ + ⅛ + $^1/_{16}$ + $^1/_{32}$ + $^1/_{64}$ . . . that sums to unity after an infinite number of iterations of the division (Clarke 1959, 220). The eye in the triangle above a truncated pyramid that stares from the Great Seal on the back of the dollar bill is the eye of eternity, the incursive, terrible eye that signifies eternal sentience beyond death and life. And its analysis yields the method of dividing the indivisible in a way that its indivisibility is not only contained but defined.

The word *continuum,* as we saw, occurs in Parmenides. It is patent that Zeno's paradoxes were elaborated by him to demonstrate that *the divisibility of the continuum is absurd but ineliminable* to lend support to Parmenides's denial of movement, division, and multiplicity to Being itself. His demonstrations run parallel with the Pythagoreans' horrified discovery of incommensurate ratios and that the continuum requires the invention of irrational numbers. (Each geometrical point corresponds to an arithmetical real number; that is to say, an irrational number.)

In modern mathematics the fractions are called "rational" numbers because they represent ratios between whole numbers. But there are intervals on a geometrical line that cannot be defined by such ratios. The hypotenuse of a right triangle whose square sides are 1 unit in length is the square root of two, to which the ratio of no two whole numbers correspond. Such numbers are called "*ir*rational" because they represent no ratio. Modern mathematicians find that they can construct new numbers that correspond to the roots of negative numbers, and because these are not part of the already understood number system that is based on the rational and irrational, they were dubbed "imaginary" numbers to differentiate them from the "real" ones—the rational and the irrational.

Again, the noetic continuum that, grasped abstractly, becomes the continuum of modern mathematics also represents the totality of all possibilities grasped verbally, since each unambiguously identified property represented by a verbal distinction can be made to correspond to a point or real number. It is noteworthy that the same word, *logos,* was used to stand for a mathematical proof, a verbal argument, an individual utterance, a story, or a magical formula. The many ways in which the continuum of "what is" can be divided, differentiated, individuated, broken into parts or divisions, rendered rational, shown to be the generator of what is intuitively distinct can all be brought under this single term—*logos.* It would not be amiss to think of Hermes-Thoth as the god of the logos, if one includes under that term the entire range of its meanings. But considered in this way, like the undivided continuum with its transfinitely many divisions, the logos is essentially paradoxical—a paradox that can only be resolved by reason if we repress some aspects of its provenance, a repression that inevitably activates the Hermetic trickster. The paradox is ineliminable. It is Being's own paradox. Visionary intuition alone can overcome the intellectual discomfiture that Being's own paradox propounds.

Again, all this is prefigured boldly, baldly, in the blazing noonday desert sunlight of ancient Egypt's realm of the gods, their eternity, and their provenance of writing.

Eternity. Paradox. Continuum. Parmenidean Being. Egypt. As such.

THE OPENING OF STONE

The Egyptians knew the moment when the gods became present in the world at the beginning of the Old Kingdom in the form of monumental statuary as "The Opening of Stone." Let me expand a bit further on Egypt as an incursion of Eternity with this in view. These remarks will evolve into an exercise which might be performed in any museum where big enough Egyptian statues of the gods or pharaohs are on view.

For the Egyptians, that which preceded the advent of the pharaonic system was called the time of the gods—a time when the immediacy of divine timelessness and the transiency of temporal phenomena had not come asunder. It seems to have been a condition not unlike that represented by the island of the Phaiakians in the *Odyssey,* where the gods converse in person with the inhabitants, attend their feasts and festivals, and do not require statues or ceremony to enjoy reciprocal communication with mortals. But this time of the gods for the Egyptians was not simply chronologically anterior to historical, pharaonic Egypt; it was itself an ontological condition, more or less recoverable everywhere where Egyptian god forms were incised with hieroglyphs and honored in theurgic ceremony. Similarly the event that initiated what to us seems the historical age of the pharaohs did not mark a moment in linear history but the "ever present origin" (Gebser 1986) of the presence of eternity as an incursion of that which is other than transiency and felt in the ontic/ontological pressure of architectural monumentality and divine statuary. Time and eternity in one sense had come asunder, but in another eternity as such had become apprehensible. This was "The Opening of Stone," the time when stone statues could manifest the presence of the god.

Eternity is what was opened in the opening of stone—eternity almost perceptible in the stillness of stone itself, in its resistance to the radical

transiency, erosion, and the generally inescapable passage of time. In stone there is a contrast to the impermanence of all that is present in the moment but intimations also of an eternity that is *uncompromisedly concrete:* It is not the eternity of mathematical abstraction (though mathematical abstraction itself, contemplated configuratively as above, can be construed configuratively to model it). It is not concept formation (as the Platonic forms turned out to be) or the constant recurrence of the rotation of the heavens, though these, too, in their way may be configured as intimating eternity. It is rather that, in stone, through the impression of something that, though entirely concrete, material, and unmediated in its presence to sense, is nonetheless all but impervious to change and must thereby participate in something outside time altogether—something that like the Now itself simply seems to stand there, while all about it apparency itself flashes in and out—of apparency! The stones retain their silence against irreverent crowd noise, wailing infants, running children, disaffected adolescents, gabbering adults, just as the pharaohs *as* the gods they become in their statues retain their presence—though the land of Egypt as the land of the gods has long transmuted into something else altogether, except for tourists and Egyptologists (and perhaps for the Green Hermeticists of oncoming times!).

Consider a human figure *in* the stone—a figure accoutred with immutable caligraphic symbols and seated or standing in positions that are symbolic, yes, but positions that themselves in their rectitude, their frontality, their stillness and poise, repeat in thought and image or carry up into themselves that quality that already imbued the stone as stone with a sense of the timeless.

I recommend going to a museum that exhibits large Egyptian statues and standing or sitting in front of a figure and taking up the posture yourself. Become the perfect mirror of the stony presence of the monumental pharaoh or god, and you will have the possibility of an intuition of the presence of the eternal that inspires and bears upon not only the stony statues but the spirit that rules the entire pharaonic epoch (and all of time and eternity apart from Egypt besides).

THE PYRAMID

> *The pyramid does not stand for something, it makes something visible.*
>
> ASSMANN, THE MIND OF EGYPT

What the Egyptian pyramid makes visible is its own incursion *as* incursion. Its form is sealed off in our space from the space from which it came. Its convergence of planes and edges toward its apex does not point to the heavens above it but to the fact that our space closes around it. The pyramid's point where eternity enters into time and space is sealed up at the top from which the pyramid's monumental massiveness rushes to appear. The interior of this massive thing is a conveyance portal, a transporter station from which the soul of the mummified pharaoh would be delivered to its eternal habitation among the gods through its identification with Osiris.

It is as if the entire pyramid were the three dimensional surface of a fourth-dimensional object, every three-dimensional point of which communicates with a hyperdimensional world. This indeed would be the sense of the interior of an object that is replete with hieroglyphic texts, whose contents are believed to convey the mummified person to the world depicted on the tomb walls. *The text itself opens onto another world.*

FIVE

THE *POIMANDRES*

INTRODUCTION

The *Poimandres* is the first tract in the compendium of writings known as the *Corpus Hermeticum,* a collection of initiatory texts dating from the first centuries of the common era. The main figure in this collection is Hermes Trismegistus, Thrice Great Hermes, and it is primarily this Hermes who is the eponymous figure in Hermeticism, really a bushel-basket term for magic-related thought and practice in late antiquity, the European Renaissance, and our own time. The *Corpus Hermeticum* belongs to a larger body of writings from late antiquity generally referred to as the *Hermetica,* whose provenance is the Alexandrian Egypt of the Hellenistic and Roman imperial period. The surviving *Hermetica* include, in addition to the *Corpus Hermeticum,* some forty texts collected by one Johann Stobäus at the beginning of the sixth century CE as an educational system for his son. There are also four texts found among the papers of the Nag Hammadi Library, a series of aphorisms known as *Hermetic Definitions* extant in Armenian, and several more recently discovered fragments now housed in libraries in Oxford and Vienna. Quotations from these and from no longer surviving Hermeticist works quoted in the writings of later Neoplatonists, church fathers, and Byzantine and Muslim authors indicate that such texts were extremely numerous in late antiquity.

The *Corpus Hermeticum* as a distinct collection was translated into Latin in 1463 by the Florentine philosopher Marcilio Ficino, who had access to fourteen entries. The most recent English translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum,* by Brian P. Copenhaver, refers to some twenty-eight manuscripts (dating from the fifteenth century CE) and includes seventeen Greek texts plus one in Latin, the *Asclepius*.

Current speculation regarding the scene of the composition and transmission of the *Hermetica* is usefully presented by Copenhaver in his introduction and by David M. Litwa in his introduction to the surviving *Hermetica* not included in the Copenhaver volume (Litwa 2018).

The *Poimandres* is the first tract in all versions of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Its title has been understood until quite recently as meaning "Shepherd of Men," a common figure in use in Jewish and Christian and other contexts to signify a spiritual teacher or guide. The phrase appears even in the *Theogony*. Recent scholarship, however, gives a more complex understanding of this term, to which I will return.

The *Poimandres* is a dialogue in which a prospective initiate converses with a teacher of wisdom who manifests first visually and then vocally during his disciple's meditation. The teacher imparts a path to knowledge that, when grasped intuitively, conducts the seeker to realization. The initiate in the *Poimandres* will become Hermes Trismegistus as his intuition ripens, so the text is an apt introduction to the world of this Hermes, who will himself be the teacher in further Hermetic texts. But Hermes's own instructor is not an initiated mortal but a deity that identifies himself as "the Mind [nous] of the Authentic One," the principle of intelligent sentience from beyond corporeal existence. Corporeal existence is governed astrologically by the *heimarmene*—functionally the seven planetary gods who dictate astrological necessity in the form of what we could call psychological traits. The principal steps on the path to realization involve releasing oneself from the conditioning of one's horoscope, the last step in which is deification, or rather the discovery of one's own divine identity from the Ogdoad, an eighth region beyond the spheres of the seven planets.

THE *POIMANDRES*

For the *Poimandres,* I consulted the original Greek text found in *Hermetica: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings Which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus,* translated by Walter Scott, Hermes House, 1982.

I was thinking about everything.

Suddenly my mind shot up
and my senses everted—
but not as in a stupor, not drunk or sated.

And it seemed to me that something very big—
completely unbounded, immeasurable—
called my name.

“What do you want to hear and what behold
and what to learn and know by minding it?” it said.
“Who *are* you?” I said.

“I am the Poimandres—the Mind of the Authentic One.”

“Then I want to know everything,” I said.

“I have what you want and am with you, everywhere.
Hold in mind what you wish to learn, and I’ll teach you.”

Everything changed. Everything opened.
And I saw a boundless view.
Everything turned into light, all mild and happy.
I was amazed.

But then in a moment again everything changed—
a downward tending darkness, ferocious and grim,
had overcome a part of it;
and I saw the *darkness* change to a watery nature.
A perturbation unspeakable, it exuded smoke as from fire,
and it made a noise—I cannot describe it—

as if of interminable wailing
and an unarticulated cry originated out of it

but from the Light a holy word came out
and it stood on the watery nature
so it seemed to me this word was the voice of the light.

And Poimandres said to me, so I could hear it,

“Do you know what you behold—what it means?”

“Tell me,” I said.

“That Light,” he said. “I AM it. Mind. The first god:
He who was before the watery nature came out of the dark;
and the one that came out of the Light
is the Logos, the word-son *of* this god.”

“What then?”

“Know by looking at,
by listening to that which is *in* you
that the Word is the Son of the Mind
and that they do not stand apart from each other
for Life is the oneness of them.
But mind the Light and study it.”

“Thank you,” I said.
And when he had imparted all this
for a long time he fixed his gaze on me

and I shook
from his look!

And when I lifted my head I beheld in my mind
how the Light was composed
of innumerable powers
and it had become an unbounded world.
I knew these things
through *seeing* the word of Poimandres.
And when I was all implex of amazement, he spoke again.

“In your mind you now know the archetypal form—
the First before the First—the Apeiron—the Limitless.”

These things, Poimandres told me.

“What then?” I said again.
“The elements of nature—from what have they sprung?”

“From the intent of the god
who looked
into the intelligible and *twinned* it.
For the watery nature, having taken the Word,
was put in order—
all elements, discriminable now,
from which the generation of the living now should come.
And pure fire leaped from the waters up to the heights,
light and sharp and active.

And the air, being light as well, followed the fire,
going up till apart
from water and earth
it reached the fire,
so that it seemed to hang suspended from it,
and the fire,
encompassed round by a mighty power,
held fast.
Earth and with it water remained commingled,
so earth might not be known
apart from water;
but both were kept in motion
because of the pneumatic word
at work on the surface of the water.

“The First Mind
being of a double nature,
had two sexes,
        like a vine
        twining
        about a wild fig
both Light and Life. And this
gave birth to another Mind: the Demiurge, the Artifex.
Which Second Mind
from spirit and fire
fashioned the Seven Directors.
These orbit the perceptible world.
Their rule is Fate: the Heimarmene.

“And the Word of the god leapt up from the down-bearing elements,
and was bound to the Mind of the Demiurge,
for the Word and the Mind of the Artifex were one being.
And the downward-bearing principles of nature
were left without sentience or reason
so as to be matter alone,
and the Mind of the Artifex
together with its Logos
sped the orbits about
and nourished the things they’d created
letting them spin
without point of onset
and to an indefinite close,
for the going round of these entities
starts where it ends.

“Then Nature, according to Mind’s intent,
drew from the down-bearing elements life-forms with no logos, for nature no longer held the word within her:
Air produced winged things, water, fish
(for by now the earth and the water
had come apart from each other)
and earth brought forth the four-footed creatures
and earth brought forth the creepers—
beasts both ferocious and mild.
But the Father Mind himself, whose being is life and light, brought forth Anthropos to be just like himself,
and he liked it, he liked his offspring,

he liked his manifest apparencies,

for this Anthropos was good to look upon

as he looked like the father himself,

so he gave him everything.

“And the Anthropos took his place in the Sphere of the Artifex,

took note of the things that his brother, the Artifex, had made, and that this brother took place above the fire;

took note of the things that the Demiurge had fashioned

and desired himself to be a Demiurge.

And the father agreed.

For the Anthropos received in himself

all the assets of the Directors—

the Directors approved of his manifest apparencies—

they liked him—

and dispersed in him their powers,

each imparting the nature proper from each.

“And Anthropos, when he’d comprehended

the being of these Directors

and had received their natures,

determined to break out through

the circles binding their orbits

and he did so.

Then he looked through the structure of fire, down, with his mind

to display, for the down-bearing Nature,

the beautiful form of the god.

“But Nature saw that beauty formed in Anthropos—

the god in Anthropos—
since he exhibited all the attributes
the Directors had placed in him,
and Nature saw it twinned in her waters,
and she saw its shadow passing on her ground,
and he, beholding this image, an image like his own,
on earth and in the water,
loved it
and determined to dwell with it.
And it became so.
And he lived in the place of the form that had no Logos.
And Nature, having taken
the one whom she loved,
entwined him entirely
and they mated, being in love.
And that is why Anthropos—humanity—
unlike all other things that live on the earth
has a double-nature:
being mortal, according to its body,
and immortal
because it is—Anthropos—Immortal
with dominion over everything,
but suffering like a mortal also, cast down under Fate.
Raised above the harmonic structure of the heavens
yet born into the condition of a disgruntled slave.
Of a diploid nature like his diploid father before him,
Awake,
from the Awake,
yet mastered by lust and oblivion.”

After he said these things, I said:

“Tell me what remains, O Mind,
for I myself lust for your word.”
And Poimandres said:

“This is a mystery hidden till today.
Nature, mating with Anthropos,
brought forth a marvel.
Since Anthropos held within him
the attributes he’d received from the Seven Directors,
seven characteristics emergent
from spirit and fire, as I’ve told you,
Nature did not hesitate to produce
seven Persons, vertical, up-standing,
according to the seven characteristics of the Directors.”
And when he’d said these things, I said,

“O Poimandres, now indeed my lust is strong!
I want to hear the rest, don’t stop now!”

Poimandres said: “Be silent.
I have not finished with this first business.”

“Behold, I am silent,” I said.

“The generation of these seven Persons was like this,” he said.
“Nature gave birth to their bodies.
Earth was the female aspect, water the male.
And the spirit came from the air, but its nature,

formwise, was similar to the Anthropos.
And now the Anthropos changed
from being Life and Light, to Soul and Mind,
from Life: Soul. And Mind from Light.
And everything remained like that
until the end of the epoch of the first generations.
Now here's the rest: the business about which
you are so impatient to hear.

"At the end of the epoch,
the chains linking everything were loosed,
according to the god's intent.
All the living creatures,
up to that time being female-male diploids
now came apart
and Anthropos likewise,
and so it came about
that humans and animals are female and male.
"And the god spoke with holy speech:
'Expand expansively. Multiply multiplicitously,
all you created ones.
And let the Anthropos know that he is immortal
because of the Mind that is in him
and that the cause of death
is desire;
but that whoever knows himself
has entered the Good.'

"Saying this, the Pronoia—Pro-Vidence—

having knowledge beforehand of that which is to come
—through the Heimarmene—made marriage matches
and set the generations going
and all things multiplied according to their kind.
And she who has recognized herself
has entered the blessèd state,
Good beyond being.
But whoever loves the body
wanders in the darkness and knows death."
"But why is it so great a crime," I said,
"that to the ones who do not recognize themselves
immortality should be denied?"

"O person—you are not listening!
Did I not tell you to take in what I say?"

"But I *do* take it in, and remember it,
and am most grateful for it!"

"Well, then *you* tell *me!*
Why
are they worthy of death
who go into death and don't know they are immortal?"

"Because darkness is the source of the body?
That the watery nature itself was a change in the darkness
and of this watery nature the body itself is composed?"

"That is correct. But why does the one who knows himself

enter the Good, as the word
of the god
said?”

I said:

“Because the Father of everything
is made of Light and Life
and from this,
Anthropos has come.”

“Correct again. If then,
being from Life and Light,
you *learn* that you yourself are *made* of them,
when you are finished here
you will *return* to them.”

These things, Poimandres told me.

• • • • •

“But explain this to me too,” I said.
“The god said, ‘Let the Mind in Anthropos know itself.’
But do not all persons have Mind?”

Mind replied, “This is *not* correct.
I, the Mind, shall come to the compassionate,
the holy, the good, and the pure.
And my being among them shall be a blessing to them
and they will know everything
and gratify the Father
with the spiritual love that is in them;

and making holy songs
and saying thankful words
will worship Mind.
And even before they give back their bodies
they will evert from bodily senses
knowing what these capacities
have the capacity to do to them.
But Mind itself will prevent them
from accomplishing their purposes.
I will stand guard at the sense-gates
preventing their vicious business
and cut off the thoughts it occasions.

“But from the greedy and envious,
the mockers, the murderers, the dummies,
I myself will stay away
and give place to an avenging daimon that will make them pay.
He’ll throw fierce flames upon them
and toss them about in a sensual tumult
making their sense-life more rife with sensual passion
the more to exact the penalty they must pay.
But the man in blind combat does not desist from combating;
his desire cannot be stopped
nor his enthusiasm
brook contradicting;
and the fire grows ever hotter through his own doing.”
“You have taught me all things well, just as I wished, O Mind,

but tell me something else:
How shall I myself go up to Life?
Speak to me about this also, O Poimandres."

"When it is time to die,
your body itself will be the first to change,
and the visible form that you now possess
shall no longer be visible.
Your character shall go back to its daimon
so that it no longer applies to you
and your bodily senses return to their sources
becoming a part of the cosmos
to be combined again in another being;
and your will, your intent, your desire
shall take up residence in some nonreasoning nature.
But the Man Himself that remains
goes up in sequence through the cosmic structure:

"To the first zone, the Moon, he releases his energy:
that which works increase and brings decay;
to Mercury, the second zone, he surrenders his cunning;
to Venus, the third, the folly of desire;
to Jupiter, the fourth zone, goes arrogance, the will to domination;
to Mars, the fifth, audacity: unmindful, precipitous daring;
to Saturn, the sixth zone, greed and the lust for money;
to the seventh, the Sun, he surrenders bad faith, mendacity,
and the wish to do harm.

“And then stripped naked of all that in him had become actual
through the sevenfold harmonic of the cosmic structure,
he takes to zone eight—the Ogdoad—
in possession now
of his own proper power.

“And he sings hymns to the Father
together with the other beings that he finds there—
and those that are present rejoice with him who has come.
And being established as of a similar nature
to those with whom he now dwells,
he hears the potencies who have *their* nature
beyond zone eight—the Ennead—
singing the god with a voice unique to themselves.

“And then in proper order
those who have accomplished this much
go up to the Father
and requiesce in those same potencies,
and becoming such potencies themselves,
they enter the Good.

“This is the goal, this the consummation;
for those that have gone *in* now have Gnosis
and are the knowers themselves.

“Why delay? You have everything.
Why not become a guide to the worthy

so that the generations of the Anthropos
may be saved through you and by the god?"

And saying these things to me
Poimandres faded away
and mixed in the region of the Powers.
And I inscribed in myself
the manifestation of Poimandres
and, being filled up with that for which I had craved, was very happy.

The sleep of my body had become alertness of soul,
the closing of my eyes, true vision,
and my silence—pregnant
with broods of wisdom to come.

Holy art Thou, Lord of the Universe,
Holy art Thou, whom Nature hath not formed.
Holy art Thou, the Vast and the Mighty one,
Lord of the Light and the Darkness.

COMMENTARY ON THE *POIMANDRES*

The Name Poimandres

Since the dialogue in the *Poimandres* represents the scene of Hermes's initiation, one can expect that it will store the essential keys to initiation generally, and indeed it does.

As noted earlier, the name Poimandres has usually been taken to mean "Shepherd of Men." But according to Peter Kingsley, the etymology (*poimen* as "shepherd" and *andres* as plural of *aner,* "man") is not possible.

Kingsley (2000) argues for a derivation from a Coptic word (Coptic is the phase of the Egyptian language current at the time of the composition of the *Corpus Hermeticum*) whose sense would be "the gnosis of Re," that "gnosis" being associated traditionally with Thoth, the Egyptian god with whom, throughout the *Corpus Hermeticum,* Hermes Trismegistus himself will be identified. Re (or Ra) is the earliest of the Egyptian sun gods, so this appellation suggests that Thoth is an aspect of that primary solar principle, which is the intelligence of the cosmos. The diurnal and seasonal cycles of the sun manifest that intelligence, and since the performance of rites emphasizing and even maintaining it was incumbent upon Egyptian priests, the priests in performing their ceremonial obligations were identified with Thoth. The *Hermetica* extend that identification to Hermes's initiates. The initiates in Hermetic Mysteries were not tasked with maintaining Egyptian solar cosmology, but they did maintain the "intelligence of the cosmos" through their own initiated understanding.

Thoth as the noetic element of the absolute sun god, Re, and therefore as origin and sustainer of the structure of the cosmos, is not only a conventional association in the hieroglyphic writing. The text in its magical function, when activated in a rite, actually *is* Thoth. These texts are written on the stonework of tombs and on the coffins of the mummies themselves and are thus associated with the essential function of funerary practice, where the soul of the mummified corpse exchanges its personal identity for its eternal being in the form of Osiris—the version of the sun god that dies and is reborn daily and seasonally. Thoth is the "author" of these texts, the creator of the cosmic and metacosmic scheme that the text expresses, and the magical link between them. Kingsley's etymology of the name Poimandres, identifying Hermes's divine instructor as the intelligential aspect of the absolute sun and linking that to the Greek-language-based idea of a shepherd of men, is not an attempt to correct the traditional understanding of the name but to expand its meaning and place it in the context of the Graeco-Egyptian world from which the *Hermetica* emerge. Kingsley argues that in both Egyptian sacred writing and in the intertwining of Greek and Egyptian in the *Hermetica,* translinguistic puns express complex relations between ideas originating in diverse linguistic contexts. They are neither jokes nor inconsequential "folk etymologies." In this case the interconnections between the Greek-sounding Poimandres and the Egyptian gnosis of Re, between the Greek Hermes Trismegistus and the

Egyptian Thoth as the cognitive principle of the solar Absolute is registered in the pun that is his name.

Liturgies written in hieroglyphic in the tombs and on the coffins of the mummies conducted the corpse to the gods and confirmed that it belonged to one of "the transfigured dead." But transfiguration by those liturgies involves that the person exchanging his being for the god understands that this is what is happening; that the divine milieu itself is being configured (by the liturgy) for this to occur; that the context for both rebirth as a god and the soul's knowledge of it are configurations of being itself as hieroglyphically articulated. The linking of Hermes to Thoth underscores the essential role of language and liturgy in the being of (the appearance of) the world.

The opening moments of the dialogue show a young Hermes in a state of reverie or meditation in which he manifests his longing to understand the ultimate nature of things, and this proves sufficient to invoke the *nous authentias,* the "Mind of the Authentic One."[*19]

This Mind has been summoned seemingly inadvertently by Hermes's rumination "about everything," and rather than delivering a portentous revelation, Poimandres opens a dialogue with a question:

> "What do you want to hear and what behold
> and what to learn and know by minding it?" it said.
>
> "Who *are* you?" I said.
>
> "I am the Poimandres—the Mind of the Authentic One."
>
> "Then I want to know everything," I said.
>
> "I have what you want and am with you everywhere.
> Hold in mind what you wish to learn, and I'll teach you."

"Hold in mind what you wish to learn": the nous in this phrase gives the essentials of the practice necessary for noetic initiation. It has a paradoxical,

self-reflective, intransitive, performative ring. Once one has awakened through contemplation a sense of the possibility of intuiting that which one wishes to understand, the rest is a matter of holding that in mind. But in that holding in mind, the prospective initiate is already half in possession of his goal. That in you which allows you to address yourself to such an inquiry is also that in you which will find an answer. The nous that speaks in the form of an enormous appearance of light and darkness is none other than Hermes's own being, not yet realized as such in his awareness. I am reminded of the common interpretation in Vajrayana Buddhism of the term *bodhicitta,* which means on the one hand "awakened mind" and on the other the intention to *become* awakened. The very desire to become a Buddha *is* the principle in one's being that makes its realization possible.

Initiation and Death

Hermes's initiation, beyond his being opened to communication with Poimandres, is described as an itinerary one travels after death. One's personality, it appears, is a combination of energies associated with the seven astrologically effective planets, energies that Poimandres catalogues in detail. But one does not receive the core of one's being, what one ultimately *is,* from the planetary gods. Their energies are adventitious sheaves or coverings that one acquires at birth (reflected in one's natal horoscope, presumably) and that one gives back to the spheres from which they came upon dying (or, I think it is clear, during the further course of one's Hermetic practice after initiation).

By the way, belief in astrology is hardly the point since it is one's conditioning—one's cognitive conditioning *as if* astrologically but really by any means—that one must achieve *release* from. Initiation is a process of overcoming one's conditioning, a kind of disrobing of the psychic garments that cover a spirit whose true being is absolutely unconditioned. Since astrology symbolizes one's conditioning and is in fact to be discarded, it is not belief in astrology, really, but only in the conditioning it symbolizes that requires one's intuitive understanding. (When I first had my horoscope drawn, I was told that I was a Virgo, and Virgos don't believe in astrology. I can confirm this with a personal qualification. We do it anyway.)

According to Poimandres, the energies of one's conditioning, the planetary characteristics, once released from one's person, may reconvene

in another, and it is this that constitutes the exigency of rebirth. If one fails to identify one's own core being as distinct from these astrologically conditioned sheaves, one will experience rebirth in their company. What is essential, then, is an intuitive recognition that one's true being is not conditioned by astrological destiny; that is, it is not conditioned at all. It is this recognition that allows one to pass to the Ogdoad, the eighth sphere beyond the seven planets where one takes one's place among the incorporeal entities—the gods—that constitute the fabric of existence and that include one's ultimate being. But this recognition is itself a kind of death, a tearing apart of one's mundane personality and a reassembling of it in a divine form. It, in fact, reiterates or at least suggests the myth of Osiris, who is dismembered by his brother, counterpart, and enemy, Set, reassembled by Isis, and reborn as their son Horus at the dawn of a new day, a new life. It is essentially parallel as well to the story we will hear Zosimos tell of his alchemical initiation.

So, though this process is presented as an after-death experience, it is clearly a soteriological structure to which one might awaken while alive. But this suggests two things: first, that the Egyptian journey of the sun through the *duat*—the underground night world—and its return at dawn to further life is essentially at play symbolically in the *Hermetica;* and second, that initiation as self-realization is understood as death and rebirth. Its parallel to Indian soteriology, both Hindu and Buddhist, that on the spiritual path one seeks to overcome conditioned rebirth, is patent. The rumor of this relation to India, by the way, was present in Alexandrian Egypt. We know, for instance, that Plotinus, the Egyptian-born founder of Neoplatonism, attempted to journey to India at one point in his career (Porphyry 1978; McEvilley 2001).

As a matter of fact, the pattern of initiation as a death and a rebirth is common to the many initiatory contexts that proliferated in Graeco-Roman Egypt and all about the Mediterranian at this time but has its roots in time immemorial. The Mysteries of Demeter at Eleusis, dating back to the Mycenaean period, involves a terrifying encounter with underworld presences and a period of physical blindness and mental confusion. This is induced by an all-day, fourteen-mile, ambulatory procession, followed by exhaustingly energetic dancing and the imbibing of an entheogenic concoction, and culminating in a revelatory theophany—a blazing flash of firelight released from the inner sanctum of the sacred building where the

Mysteries were consummated and visible for miles around. The Mysteries of Dionysos and Orpheus have similar structures.

In regard to astrology, each context of Hellenistic and Roman period soteriology holds that awakening liberates one from astrological conditioning. For the Gnostics, the entirety of creation was engineered by a demon-god whose instrument, in some versions, is the astrological cosmic system. The Stoics seek liberation from destiny by overcoming repugnance to it (*amor fati*); the Platonists see the emanated universe as a ladder of descent that must be reascended; while Christians reject the entire pertinence of one's cosmic situation to the moral health of one's soul.

Atemporal Essence and Inalienable Immediacy

Atemporal eternity is often confusedly associated with immortality in the classical world, where the gods are referred to most commonly as immortals. They are different from the mortals primarily because they do not die. But if that which is inalienably concrete in existence is the atemporality of the Now; if it is possible to embody this Now directly in one's experience; and if direct intuitive knowledge of this is the sine qua non for the realization of one's being, then the accomplishment of the soteriological quest, the success of one's initiation, must have involved that experience of the atemporal Now: that that which makes experience concrete and actual is not in time at all.

Poimandres tells Hermes that the fundamental requirement for his passing beyond the coils of the *heimarmene* is the recognition that he possesses both a mortal and an immortal nature. But in this context, I think we have to read "atemporally eternal" for "immortal." This knowledge is not a matter of accepting a doctrine, but it does involve the acquisition of an intuition. The mind that through its own essential function—knowing—fails to grasp its own nature directly must continue to wander under the "figure" of existence that it does hold; a figure under which its cognitive powers are alert to nothing but what the seven planetary energies (or however one thinks of these conditioned energies) concern. Only noetic intuition can awaken to intuition's noetic nature, awaken, that is, in the actuality of the Now *to* the Now and to one's way of being with it that is not in time.

"One's level of being attracts one's life" is, I think, a favored bon mot in the system of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, but one's level of being can

vacillate pretty wildly so that at different moments, even within a brief time span, one can have access to one's own being at different levels. Consequentially, one can be willing to entertain ideas about one's own being without being aware how these ideas are conditioned by intuitions that are, in their moment, actually available to one. One holds ideas in mind and would be hard pressed to say how they got there. That one really does dwell on many levels of cognitive understanding is borne out analogously in the Hermetic literature by the multiplicity of roles and identities of Hermes Trismegistus himself: young aspirant, initiated teacher, culture hero, and, finally, the god Hermes-Thoth. The multiple manifestations of the Hermetic Genius configures the multiple levels of manifestation of the human subject, a configurative hierarchy of (apparent) identities, each of which will have *different degrees of access to the levels that transcend it.*

I can discern something of this in my own being even without actual initiation, for before I have engaged in a search for my own true being, the different aspects of my personality might very well fail to be in communication with one another. Self-awareness is, perhaps surprisingly, all the more variable in an initiatory psychic milieu: as one's consciousness expands (to use the common psychedelic expression) one becomes cognizant not necessarily of an alien being supervenient upon one's common personality (though such a figure might manifest, too) but of the broader and more inclusive scope of one's own awareness, specifically of the different formations in one's own psyche and how they do, do not, or might relate to one another.

If the idea that our true identity is among the gods seems absurd, hubristic, or dangerously grandiose, that may be due to our inability at one level of consciousness to intuit how we actually are at another. A child has little awareness of what his or her sense of self will be like as an adult; an adult has little sense of what it will feel like to be an elderly person or on his or her deathbed. Yet often one *can* feel the continuity of one's identity with even the earliest memories of childhood. We connect pretty easily with levels of being prior to our present state, but only identify with higher levels in flashes of intuition and further degrees of realization. What is the limit to our expansion of consciousness or to discoveries of capacities and states of (apparent) Being beyond our present state? As experiences of the variability of levels of awareness become more familiar, the acknowledgment that conscious expansion cannot be circumscribed by our present level of being

seems but a frank admission that one does not know what those limits, if any, actually are. Only dogmatic denial of such possibilities stand in the way of their realization. Only consciously inhabited agnosia can overcome their occultation. Different experiences along the path of initiation may trigger the essential intuition. It is not possible to know in advance which experience will do that. But it is manifest that what one will experience is this: what happens to one will be registered in one's awareness and will be conditioned by the intuitions available to one, and that these intuitions can without question change and expand. What one senses as possible regarding Being and one's own being can and will change and expand as well.

Go in Fear of the Reified Invariant

My view of the spiritual life as an "ascent" in which "higher levels" contain the lower ones has the paradoxical consequence that its success must utterly undermine and dissolve the ontological positivity of the very world structure that occasioned it. It is only from below that there seem to be higher levels. The Ogdoad and the ineffable One are not hypostases above or beyond the cosmic or psychic structures beneath them but rather this: that the very power of containment these structures exhibit indicate that they themselves are transitory, illusory, relative, configured.

Manifest configurations of the cosmos are neither good in a positive, world-affirming sense nor evil in a Gnostic dualistic one. *They are simply there to be released from,* into a zone of freedom whose nature and possibilities are to be found out by each successfully liberated person, and *that* is why there are so very many accounts of ascent and liberation: each person reports what he or she came to know—that is to say, to configure—as the liberative events took hold of them. Comparisons between Gnostic, Chaldean, Hermetic, Orphic, Plotinian, later Neoplatonic, and Christian views—not to mention the varied accounts within these traditions themselves—must be made with great circumspection and care that each account be allowed to show its own peculiarities. Being may be "one," but ontologies surely are "many," and the authenticity of the account of one's ascent and realization must include both the ineffable singularity that all ascents confirm and the singularity of what one configures in immediate response to one's realization of it. Authoritarian Christianity is simply a failure of nerve in relation to the rich variability and true freedom that opened in the early Christian centuries. In time, this suppressed multiplicity

came to express itself as an endless procession of minutely differing theological positions within Christianity and their historically fratricidal competition. The true “invariant” that surmounts all variations cannot be reified; that is, made real. Therefore I offer this sententious piece of wisdom: Go in fear of the reified invariant, because there is no one way to Being and its configurable transformations.

SIX

THE *CHALDEAN ORACLES*

INTRODUCTION

As far as we know, the series of fragmentary verses in Greek hexameters known as the *Chaldean Oracles* were written toward the end of the second century CE by a father and son pair known as Julianus the Chaldean and Julianus the Theurgist, collectively called the Juliani. It is speculated that one of these received the substance of the oracles in a dream or trance or contemplation, while the other composed the verses. It is sometimes thought they were received in Syria. They certainly circulated in Alexandria and in circles generally interested in what we might call "theosophical" matters throughout the eastern reaches of imperial Rome. The Neoplatonists (not including Plotinus) accepted them as direct communication from the gods, hence their being dubbed oracles, as if in response to a request for wisdom or information. We owe their survival to Neoplatonic authors who quoted them as authority for their own views, interpreting and commenting upon them, and generally reading them as confirming their own ontology and cosmology.

All the fragments we possess come to us through some such quotations, ranging from the third-century Porphyry and Iamblichus to the fourth-century Eusebius, Synesius and Proclus in the fifth, Damascius and Simplicius in the sixth, and finally the Byzantine Michael Psellos. Porphyry, Iamblichus, Synesius, Proclus, Damascius, and Simplicius are pagan Platonists; Eusebius is a Christian; and Michael Psellos, a Christian Platonist. The selection of material from what was presumably a more ample and organically connected collection of hexameters is thus due to the interests and biases of these witnesses.

In any case, we depend upon the context in late authors' texts to situate the fragments. I have included to the right of each one the fragment number

given in the Ruth Majercik edition of the *Oracles,* so one can reassociate them with their contexts. (In these notes, the fragment numbers I provide are as the order in my own text.) But it has been my desire, as far as possible, to allow the *Oracles* to speak for themselves, even at the price of a certain obscurity. No one knows how the fragments were ordered in their original circulation, so I felt free to give them an order of my own.

Modern commentators have worked assiduously to integrate the verses' terms, concepts, mythologems, and cosmological structures into a coherent system, allowing parallels with Neoplatonic, Hermetic, Gnostic, Christian, or Stoic systems to guide them where suggestive and possible. Readers interested in pursuing this project should examine the bibliographies and notes to *Hekate Soteria* by Sarah Iles Johnston (Johnston 1990) and the translation and commentary by Ruth Majercik (Julianus 2013), the works upon which I have relied primarily for this translation. Reading the fragments without being excessively impressed by either Neoplatonic authors' or modern scholars' efforts to reconstruct the system of the *Oracles,* I have the sense that it is simply not possible to recover such a system. I do not say this in any way to disparage the *Oracles,* which I am in a sense happy to receive as a certain incursion of the gods; in fact, it strikes me that the verses lie in rather close proximity to such an incursive event or series of events. I am referring to the awkwardness of the hexameters, which somewhat snobbish literary attitudes have noted, and the inconsistency of the concepts, which somewhat snobbish philosophical attitudes have not failed to notice. The awkwardness of the hexameters and the apparent inconsistency of the thought bear witness to the fact that we are dealing with grapes fresh plucked from the inspirational vine. The language of the *Chaldean Oracles* has not been hammered into conformity with a conceptual system, tradition, or institution bent upon normalizing and canonizing fresh utterance for institutional or traditional uses.

It is also clear that we are not dealing with a theosophical system of long standing that might have provided a normative umbrella under which this particular revelation might have flourished. The context is simply the magical, speculative, and practical world of the second century, Greek-writing and the Roman Empire, where soteriologically oriented cosmology and ceremonial magic were in mutual contact and living, productive play.

That said, there is no question but that something *like* a Neoplatonic or Gnostic or Hermetic soteriological universe is the ambience of thought within which the *Oracles* were received, but the quirkiness and energy of the texts beg us not too hastily to mistake what are primary utterances (or at least secondary, assuming that an initial oracular transmission has been worked up as hexameters) for the formal terminology of later historical exigencies.

My concern was to make the *Oracles* read as if they made up a single poem. There are some 260 fragments in all, 87 of which I have used in this text. I dismissed the fragments that may well have been interpolations from Christian contexts because they seem to be of a different character than the ones that interested me. But the selection is mine, made for what I take to be their poetic interest.

THE *CHALDEAN ORACLES*

Original Greek consulted for my translation is from *The Chaldean Oracles: Text, Translation, and Commentaries,* translated by Ruth Dorothy Majercik, Prometheus Trust, 2013.

1

Altogether clad in clamorous light
arming mind and soul with trident force
throw the entire *synthema* of the triad
into your being;
nor frequent the water course of the celestial fire flux
in a distracted manner;

rather—concentrate!

[2]

2

There exists a certain Mind Thing.

To *it*
one must *put*
mind's Flower.

And if you incline mind *to* it
as if attending some *thing,*
you are not minding *that.*

It is the very possibility of mightiness
flashing circumambient light
in mental sectors.

And do not attend it with vehemence
but by means of the long
extended flame of mind
that measures all things
but not that one Mind Thing.

And do not hold mind to it
with an obstinate intensity

but facing the eye of your soul the other way,
turn an empty mind toward that one Mind Thing
in order to study that Mind Thing

because it already exists
outside the mind.

[1]

3

It is not possible to adduce a name for it,

as if a name could be adapted to it.
This therefore:

What is beyond all things
is only referred to as the One
by those desiring to utter the ineffable.

[9]

4

The mind of the Father
has sown symbols
down in the world.
The mind, that is, that thinks the Intelligibles.

They are said to be
things of ineffable beauty.

[108]

5

For all things that issue from the One
and to the One return,
are divided, intellectually, into many bodies.

[9]

6

Do not retain in your mind
the multiplicitous otherness,

but amplify the Intelligence in the Soul
toward the One.

7

Urge yourself onward
to the center
of the clamorous light.

[111]

8

Unlock the Immortal
depth of Soul.

Let all your eyes
fly up!

UP UP!

[112]

9

The most robust of natures
behold truth on their own account
and are all the more the discoverers
being saved through their own strength.
Weaker natures
require tutelage
from others
complete
where they are not.

[117]

To some, the god has provided instruction
so that the mark of the light
might be recognized.

Others he has fructified in their slumber
by their own strength.

[118]

10

How do the angels
elevate the soul?

By irradiating soul with fire,

casting light upon it from everywhere,

making it full of undefiled fire,
imparting to it
un-in-clining order
and capacity
not to scatter
to matter's *dis*-order
but make contact
with the light
of godlike things.

[122]

11

Hekate says:
These are the thoughts of the Second Father
after which
        my fire
            spirals.

[38]

12

Those who release
the soul on the breath
are free.

[124]

13

For god-things are not accessible
to bodily-minded mortals
but are accessible to such as,
naked, hasten up—

UP UP!

[116]

14

When you see
        the shapeless
            sacrificial fire
        shining
            leaping
down through the depths
        of the whole cosmos:

Listen to the voice of the Fire.

[148]

15

Says Hekate:

Invoke me often
and you'll see
that everything
        is LIONS:

For neither does the arched mass of the sky appear,
nor do the stars shine.
The light of the moon is occluded;
the earth has no fixed place.

All things are seen in lightning flashes.

[147]

16

Having intoned these things
you will see a fire like a child
leaping
        extended on the billowing air
or a fire on which no form has been impressed
and from it a voice sent out

or a rich light rushing in spirals about a field
or perhaps you'll see a horse
more glittering than starlight
or a child mounted on the fast back of a horse
or a fiery child ornamented with gold
or, again, a naked one
on the back of a horse
standing, shooting a bow.

[146]

17

Unique. Beyond.

Not cut into small pieces

but of one form, indivisible.

[152]

18

Nor will you leave
the detritus of matter
back on a beetling crag,
but that there'd be a portion for an image
at a place
surrounded by light.

[158]

19

Avengers—person stranglers.

[161]

20

Apollo
exulting
in harmony of light.

[71]

21

I, the divine, have arrived

armed to the teeth.

[72]

22

Zeus in the sky,

in the midmost region,
the Concourse of Air.

Then another—the third—heats up earth.

These three furious Princes
are served by all things.

[73]

They are Originaries
because they're the first to give rise
to the flow of their own streams.

Therefore their cosmic level is celebrated as:
Primordial Fountain

[74]

23

Implacable thunderbolts leap out of him
and the lightning-bolt-receiving
womb of shining rays
of Hekate sired by the Father

and the undergirdling Fire Flower
and the strong spirit beyond the fiery poles . . .

24

The Mind of the Father,
minding with strong intent,
spun out thought forms,
putting before an ordered,
polymorphous world
an imperishable paradigm,

and down its disorderly track,
appeared an ordered cosmos
engraved with all ideas.

One source exists for this;
and from it, dividing and dividing
entities unapproachable
spin off
having splintered on the body of the world.

Those who are borne about
the terrifying wombs
like a swarm of bees
flashing hither and yon—
are thoughts
from the Paternal source
copiously culling the Fire Flower
from the pinnacle of sleepless time.
The Father's primal self-perfected source spring
gushed these first ideas.

[37]

25

In the midst of the Fathers

the center of Hekate.

[50]

26

In her womb hollows
all things are sown.

[28]

27

Visible from everywhere

she has faces on all sides

and sends forth
vessel chanels
of embodied life

containing within her
the center
from which all beings
proceed.

[189]

About her womb on the right
a hollow full of lumpy gruel
gushes abundantly:

it is the primordial font of psychic fluid
ensouling, abundantly,
light, aether, fire, worlds.

[51]

28

On the left side of her womb
there lies the source of virtue—
remaining wholly within
not giving up
    the virgin state.

[52]

29

From the back of the goddess is hung
inexhaustible Nature.

30

Says Hekate:

After the paternal thoughts—
I, the Psyche, dwell
ensouling all things
with my heat.

[53]

31

Sun-fire
    fixed at the place of the heart.

[58]

Sun-world—entirely luminous.

[59]

32

Helios: Fire;
Out-channel of fire;
Housekeeper of fire

[60]

33

Moon after Sun
Air after Moon:
Aethereal course
    and inexhaustible lunar impetus-onset.
Air flows;
    Aether, sun, moon-breaths, air chiefs.
Of the solar: cycles;
Of moon plash: clangs;
Of air: wombs.

Portion of aether and sun,
and channels of moon and air;
portion of aether and sun and moon;
such things as swim with air.

Air: expanse;
Moon: course;

Eternal circuit of the Sun.

[61]

34

When the channels merge,
the Highest Life
consummates the work
of inextinguishable fire.

[66]

35

Whatever
other
fiery mass there was

self-working all things
so that the cosmic body be completed
and cosmos come clear
and not appear
to be like a membrane . . .

[68]

36

Though the sky exists
mimetic of Intellect,
that which is fashioned from it
has something somatic about it.

[69]

37

Nature, making space through all things,
hovers suspended from Great Hekate:
For tireless Nature rules worlds and actions
so that sky might turn
drawn down along its eternal course
and swift Helios come about the center
according to his ethos

[70]

38

Says Hekate:

Complete my animal image

purged as I shall instruct you:
Make a body from field rue;
ornament with delicate small beast forms
(such as spotted lizards
that live about the house);

Pound storax, myrrh, and frankincense
with these beasts

into a mixture
and under
a waxing moon
in the clear light of ether
finish the telestics.

[224]

39

You do not cognize
that god is good,
O drudge-mule-men: so sober UP!

[15]

40

Matter?
        Squalid. Needy.

[100]

41

Don’t look Nature in the face:
her name is Destiny: Heimarmene.

[102]

42

Don’t augment
the Heimarmene.

[103]

43

Don’t extinguish your mind

[105]

lest earth beasts
        keep house
                in your vessel.

[157]

44

Don’t change
the Barbarous Names.

[150]

45

O Person—impudent Nature’s contrivance . . .

[106]

46

Don’t cast monstrous reckonings
from under the field
into your mind—
the plant of truth grows not on earth.
Nor take the measure of the Sun with rods—
the Sun is borne according
to the everlasting intent of the Father
and not because of *you.*

Leave the Moon alone—
she courses through the action of Necessity.

The procession of the stars was
not brought to birth for your pleasure.

And the flat planing motion
of common birds
never yields true omens
nor do the cuts
of sacrificial entrails.

All these are toys,
support for the frauds of the market.

Flee these.

Rather go up to the holy pleasure garden of true piety
where Virtue, Wisdom, and Good Order
come together.

[107]

47

And do not stoop to the cosmos of black light
below which an abyss is established
always amorphous
cloud-surrounded
image-besotted
thoughtless and unclean
beetling, distorted
always in contortions
about a maimed depth
always given in marriage
to an inapparent shape,
idle—barren—
breathless . . .

[163]

48

The god-sustaining silence
of the Fathers.

49

The Father seized himself—nor locked his private fire
away in mind's potential . . .

[3]

50

Possibility is with him; Mind is from him.

[4]

51

For the First Father perfected all things
and gave them to a Second
whom you, and the entire human race,
mistake for the First one.

[7]

52

The Father
is
the noetic entity,
having the thinking thing

within himself.

[20]

53

The gods have provided instruction in many lunges:

Many of these
throw themselves into the picture

riding on the glittering
of apparent worlds.

[76]

54

The lunges
thought up by the Fathers—
themselves
think
moved as they are
by his unspeakable intentions
so as *to* think.

[77]

55

The First Connector

at the very peak
of his singular subsistence
exists
by himself

outside of everything.

[84]

56

The Father of gods and men
put Mind in Soul
and Soul in sluggish body.

[94]

57

That the Soul
a shining fire
by power

of the Father
remains immortal
and is
Mistress of Life
and has
the fullnesses

of many cosmic worlds.

[96]

58

Those who have turned
to serve Generation
but served with unbowed necks
leave Generation

to go back UP.

[99]

59

Flying up and away

the soul of one
Whose-Voice-Is-Divided

will throttle the god
into its own entity

and no longer holding anything mortal inside it

but drunk on the god now within it

justly boasts of the harmony
under which
even the mortal body
lives.

[97]

60

But the mind of the Father
does not receive
the intent of the Soul
until it comes out of forgetfulness
and utters the word
that has been placed within it
mindful of the pure paternal *synthema.*

[109]

61

Seek the channel of soul
by which
in sequence
it descended
and became the body's *menial.*

Seek
in sequence
how to reascend

unifying ceremonial action
with theurgical formulae.

[110]

62

Hasten to the light and to the light beams
of the Father
whence the soul
by Mighty Mind engarmented
has been sent to you.

[115]

63

Take care
for the purification
of your Body of Light

the soul-vessel

clean of husks.

[120]

64

A mortal

having drawn near the fire
will radiate god-light

allowing a greater share

and participation more piercing

in the light of the gods.

[121]

65

The souls, by cognizing the acts of the Father,
flee the reckless wing of fate's apportioning.

In god they requiesce
and quaff the full-flowering flames
that fall out of the Father
from which, as the flames descend,
the souls pluck
the soul-fostering blooms

of the fire-fruits.

[130]

66

The sluggish theurgist
loses the god.

[141]

67

Things unstamped
get stamped.

[144]

68

Theurgists
don't fall
into the rabble

(the ones who go about in packs)
subject to Destiny.

[153]

69

That
which is One
without a kind
here

has its singular nature
from the One.

[169]

70

The Father guides us,
opening paths of fire
lest, out of forgetfulness,
we pour ourselves away
into an abject basin.

[171]

71

The vehemence of matter
by which
many are pulled down
into twisted fluxes . . .

[172]

72

Many-minded truth

[182]

is in the depths.

[183]

73

Since the soul
is a pantomorphic image,
it possesses the principles of everything that is.

[186b]

74

Thus

a hidden order

embraces
the whole noetic realm

with a single form.

[198]

75

Sing the praises of Chronos,
that he is both older and younger,
an unfurling circle—eternal.

[199]

76

Particular souls
become encosmicized
according to the vehicles

peculiar to each.

[201]

77

Swiftly flee from chthonic passivities, flee far away—
O you who possess the highest Eye of the Soul
and un-inclining rays
that you might hoist
the body's great ponderous bridle
by means of pure Soul
and the Father's ethereal luster . . .

[213]

78

The moon mounts
all generation
and visibly governs
all things beneath her:

Nymphs of springs and spirits that live in water
and beings in chthonic depths and aerial spirits
and ones beneth sun rays
and male and female moon riders—
Ouranian, stellar, or abysmal . . .

[216]

79

A sweet desire grips all
to dwell forever on Olympus
as fellows of the deathless gods.

But it is not lawful
for all to step into those halls.

It is not the person who has mindfully fixed his intent
on sacrificial entrails
that will make it to Olympus
airborne on the subtle wings of the Soul
when his body's scattered,
but whoever is wise.

[217]

80

Says Hekate:

After dawn burst splendor
infinite, full of stars,
I left the unpolluted house of god
and stepped
on life-fostering earth
according to your request
persuaded by those ineffable words
in which a mortal person
delights in delighting
the mind of the immortals . . .

[219]

81

Drawing them out of the aether
by means of secret lunges,
you easily lead them to earth against their will;

but the middle beings—
the ones who ride the middle winds—
far from the god fire—
you take them for split-voiced mortals,
as if they were oracular dreams,
shamefully doing the demons harm . . .

[223]

82

It has both: it holds Mind Things in its Mind
and brings sensuous perception
to the worlds.

[8]

83

Paternal intellect, self-engendered,
having conceived his works,
inseminated everything
with a fire-burdened chain of love

that all things might go on loving
till time without limit;
that things woven
by the intellective
light of the Father
never fall . .

[39]

84

The Principles

that know
the intellective
acts of the Father,

concealed them in an ambience
of sensible and somatic workings.

[40]

85

Ideas are at once
separated and compounded
by the Chain of Wondrous Love
that first leapt from the mind,
mind-fire engarmenting chained fire,
so as to blend together
the mixing bowls of the sources
while holding forth the Flower
of his fire . . .

[42]

86

For Aion alone,
imbued with the strength of the Father,
copiously culling the Flower of Mind,
has the wherewithal to know
the Father
Mind
imparting it to all
Principals and Sources
sustaining their constant vortex

in ceaseless motion.

[49]

87

Hekate indeed is the source
and spring of blessèd intellection,
for the First Power receives the birth of All
in her unspeakable womb hollows
and pours it forth on the All
as it runs its course.

[56]

COMMENTARY ON THE *CHALDEAN ORACLES*

The Configuration of Apparent Being in the Chaldean Oracles

The Chaldean universe, like the Neoplatonic, the Hermetic, and various Gnostic systems, presents a multitiered cosmos with the number of tiers depending on how one counts, though the *Oracles* themselves, like the Neoplatonic texts, favor triadic formations. There is a Creator-Father who is both a primordial Mind and an ineffable singularity. He or it is beyond all distinctions, divisions, and forms but nevertheless is referred to in anthropomorphic terms (as Father) and, more conceptually, as the singularity beyond (*hapax epekeina*). *Hapax* means "one of a kind," hence "singularity"; *epekeina* means "transcending," "beyond." This First Mind "emanates" (to use Neoplatonic parlance) a Second Mind or Second Father, also called a Second Fire. The Second Father can be more easily imaged, mythologized, and assigned attributes. He mediates the ineffable possibilities of the first and is himself imaged as a cache of lightning bolts or fiery flashes that leap and even spiral forth from the more primordial Father. The spiraling thunderbolts impregnate Hekate, a figure whom the Neoplatonists understood as their "World Soul" corresponding roughly to their third hypostasis, though technically not identical with it. The psyche as

hypostasis is an atemporal emanation from nous. The World Soul is that hypostatic psyche as she projects the forms she receives from nous into time. She is out of time, but her act of further emanation creates time. Hekate, for the Neoplatonists, would seem to be both, as seen in the image of her having a "double womb." She is both *virgo intacta* and cosmic mother. The *cosmoi*—the worlds of each of the planets—spiral forth; or, in an alternate usage image, nature hangs suspended from her back (fragment 29). Nature is the world of matter generally extending to and even typified by the interior of Earth: a chthonic darkness from which demons rise to distract human souls from their theurgic ceremonies.

The term *theurgy* (literally "god-work") was first introduced in the *Oracles* and is their term for all aspects of working directly with the gods. *Synthemata* (plural of *synthema*), or symbolic images and verbal formulae, have been sewn into the material world during the emanative process and etched into human souls (see Fragment 1). Reading them affords contact with the levels of being from which they emanated and erects a ladder of symbolic steps by which theurgists might return to the upper world, there to achieve union with the First Father: a return that the *Oracles* refer to as the blossoming of the "Flower of Mind" (Fragment 2) at the "pinnacle of sleepless time" (Fragment 24).

The cosmic structure of the *Oracles* also features entities called messengers (*angeloi*), initiating spirits (*teletarchs*), and connectors. How they are arranged in a hierarchy is not completely transparent in the fragments that we possess.

Another important genus of entities are the *iunges* (singular *iunx* and origin of our word *jinx*), also referred to as *strophalingoi* (spinning tongues). The iunges contribute to and/or derive from (middle voice/ intransitivity) the spiraling motion that propagates from top to bottom and bottom to top of the Chaldean universe, intimately imparting motion to the astral, planetary, and lunar worlds. The iunges are also embodied in a concrete device, something like a top (because it spins) and something like a bull-roarer, because it is flung about in a circling whip-like motion to make a whirring sound, through which the gods communicate with the theurgist. As with the bees and lyre in the *Hymn to Hermes,* this is effected by a consecrated act of attentive, intentional *listening*. Such listening, intent on hearing the utterances of higher entities, constitutes, I would say, an

exalted level of mental functioning that configures (also activates, motivates, induces, in fact *invokes*) those very entities so that they might *incline* toward the practitioner and in some manner speak to him or her. The process of oracular consultation becomes a means for soteriological progress. One activates and intensifies one's powers of attentive listening and of focusing one's configurative intent in the very act of consultation. Consultation is invocation. The god is co-continuous with its conjuror.

The entire series of concepts and performances is highly intransitive. Hekate communicates with the theurgist by delivering instructions on how to communicate with *her*. The iunx is both a divine entity and the sacred object by which the theurgist receives transmission from that entity. But it is also both the cosmically instantiated archetype of spiral motion and the object by which just such a motion can be induced to produce a sound. That sound resonates with the spiraling dynamism that structures the cosmos and links the theurgist through such sympathetic resonance to Hekate herself. But the link requires a concrete act of listening. And the act of listening configures what it hears.

In whirling the iunx the theurgist's body participates in the whirling spirality of the cosmic dynamism. One thinks of the Sufi whirling dervishes, whose movements are also coordinated cosmically so that the dervish's majestic spirality entrains to the motion of the stars.

The spiral action extends the circular motion that the Platonists always associate with the eternal archetype for time into time itself by coiling the circle about a straight time line—the linear temporality around which the circular motion native to the soul coils in its descent toward and through the material universe.

This spiraling descent also determines the inverse spiral path by which the practitioner returns to the ineffable First Father. That path involves contemplations, oracular consultations of the above sort, and other ceremonies, by which ascent repeats in the opposite direction the way in which mortal flesh becomes imbued with sentience, thus liberating sentience itself from its mortal coil.

The *Oracles* also teach the theurgist how to imbue statues with living souls through the art of *telestics* by which, for instance, the Egyptians incarnated their gods in metal or stone. The process by which a material image receives a divine spirit and that by which a material body becomes a

sentient being are strictly analogous. The famous mind-body problem and its Cartesian dualism covers and covers over the same ontological mystery: I myself am matter upon whom something analogous to a telestic operation has been performed. Perhaps by retracing the path to sentience in the opposite direction I recover my divinity.

Telestics

A telestic operation is prescribed in this translation's fragment 38:

> Says Hekate:
>
> Complete my animal image
> purged as I shall instruct you:
>
> Make a body from field rue;
> ornament with delicate small beast forms
> (such as spotted lizards
> that live about the house);
>
> Pound storax, myrrh, and frankincense
> with these beasts
> into a mixture
>
> and under
> a waxing moon
> in the clear light of ether
> finish the telestics.
>
> [224]

Telestics actually refers generally to initiatory procedures, but more particularly to the ceremony for imbuing a statue with a living spirit.

Fragment 38 reads like a text from the *Greek Magical Papyri,* about which I will discourse further in my comments on the Zosimos text.

A detail in this fragment, by the way, suggests that the Juliani and their goddess were endowed with a certain entheogenic expertise. The "field rue" from which the "animal image" is to be fashioned contains the chemical harmaline. In contemporary Peruvian (and now worldwide) shamanic practice, harmaline is an ingredient in the psychoactive decoction known as ayahuasca, evolved by Peruvian medicine persons, whose active constituent is DMT, N-dimethyltryptamine, a fast-acting psychotropic agent. DMT is actually generated by the human body, but an inhibiting substance is produced along with it that curtails the psychotropic effect. If synthesized DMT is ingested rather than smoked, for instance, the inhibitor inhibits the trip. To inhibit the inhibitor, a secondary substance is worked into the ayahuasca brew, and that substance is harmaline, which also has its own, less potent, psychotropic action. The mention of harmaline in a text instructing how to fashion and charge a divine image suggests that the theurgical practices that the *Oracles* give as their context may have included psychotropic substances. The image comes alive because its very body is the medicine that induces the presence of the god.

It isn't clear whether the lizards mentioned are decorative images or actual little beasts sacrificed for the procedure, the inclusion of beast parts in magical potions not being unusual in such proceedings. If lizards are meant to be part of a broad category that also includes salamanders, the text may be hinting at psychotropic decoctions, derived from the fire salamander.

Theurgy

The term *theurgy* apparently originates with the *Oracles* and was used by Iamblichus to differentiate the practices that he favored from vulgar magic in which gods are compelled by acts of will to do the sorcerer's bidding. The Christian father Eusebius, from whom we have a number of the oracle fragments, was troubled by this "compelling," and apparently thought of the entire theurgical procedure as involving compulsion in this way.

That this is not an accurate view of the situation can be seen from the following consideration. The logical organization of the *Oracles* seems to be shot through with a certain intransitivity: the goddess bestows in

theophany the abilities by which her theophany becomes possible. It is as if the goddess's very being depended upon her theophany, the fact of her appearance as a goddess. The divine as such is configured as the goddess when she shows to the theurgist that form through which she may be solicited. Her coming to appearance as a goddess occurs neither by her action and the theurgist's pure receptivity nor the theurgist's action and her mechanical obedience to the theurgist's command. It occurs in the "middle voice" like the Muses in Hesiod's poem. There is no clear distinction between the coercion of the god and the supplication to her. The ability to properly *compel* the deity is given *by* the deity. (This is not entirely true of the procedures given in the *Greek Magical Papyri,* where, in some cases, the compelling of the spirit invoked is undeniable.)

The Double Womb of Hekate

The *cosmoi* are the planetary worlds—to each planet its cosmos. This translates for me as "to each god its ontology," but it also suggests the multiplicity of physical universes, each with its own laws, which, in our time, is speculated to burgeon from a metacosmos beyond the time and space in which each is situated. Hekate would be the name for that metacosmos: the womb that gives birth to nature itself. Still, Hekate's *double* womb—half virgin, half with hymen broken—does give birth to each ontology, each cosmos. This double condition suggests that though the primitive simplicity and transcendence of that which precedes manifestation is broken by manifestation, it yet retains that primordial state esoterically. Hekate is both virgin and wife, in Meister Eckhart's formulation for the Virgin Mary, both eternal Now and temporal flux (Schürmann 1977, 3).

Flower of Mind

Under what circumstance can the mind be said to flower? Focus, in reading a text, on the moment of its utterance; feel it in its moment of expression. Read it as if it were the expression of your own mind in the moment of reading it. Put aside the effort to find a dogmatic sense, governed by an "authorized" interpretation. Especially do not search for the text's historical origin to locate its privileged authority, but do so, rather, to establish your own relation to the principle of its vitality—as if to rekindle in your own being its unpredictable, anarchic potency.

With all due caveats regarding the impossibility of establishing an absolute difference between a text's absorption into an authoritarian structure (with the *Oracles* their cooptation as scripture by the Neoplatonists) and their moment of emergence (their reception and composition by the Juliani), it is still the case that the *Oracle* texts arise as *essays*—"attempts"—to project in writing an event at the boundary between what can and what cannot be expressed at all.

I feel that we have the *Chaldean Oracles* particularly close to the moment of their own emergence, and I feel that this is so precisely because it is not easy to make out how their various figures fit together without recourse to the much later intellectual contexts that ordered and interpreted them. Composed sometime during the second century CE, they became *scripture* for Neoplatonists from Porphyry (third century CE) to Damascius (sixth), but what were they in their own moment?

Hermes is the hermeneut, certainly, but interpretation itself is not limited to the quest for certainty: it is more properly a factor in the spontaneous act of reading, and as *ta'wil,* it leads both the text and the reader back to their truth.

A Certain Mind Thing: Poetics and Apophasis

Fragment 2 gives a particularly suggestive account of the apophatic (knowledge of god obtained through negation) strain in the discourse of the *Oracles* that bears upon Parmenides's warning that *ta dokounta* (the things that appear), though they link directly to Being, are never *as* they appear. Apophatic reading denies whatever predicate seems in the moment to fit the discourse and redirects the reader to further search to recover how the text is true for oneself as reader of it. Fragment 2 propounds its own version of this mystery through a series of transformations of the word *nous,* itself in a poetic tour de force of apophatic "unsaying" (Sells 1994). Modes of addressing *ti noeton,* "a certain mind thing," are suggested—modes of inclination. If you "incline" *your* nous (which apparently is not quite either *ti noeton* nor *noou anthei,* the "flower of mind," but your cognitive faculty in general) in an ordinary manner—you *know* some *thing* that *is*, so that as a result it seems to you that you recognize an object and know what it is—precisely this ordinary cognitive apprehension means you do *not* know *it*.

In these lines, the mind as ordinary nous with its range of inclinations can apparently be redirected to apprehend what is beyond it and, in that very enhancement of its capability, will find itself ensnared, ensorcelled, beguiled by its own seemingly definite cognition. Knowing something *as* something is precisely the mark of the mind's failure to perform its enhanced noetic function. The contemplator is brought into a noetic atmosphere that, right on the edge of what cannot be cognized at all, nonetheless is replete with a wealth of rather perspicuous cognitive distinctions, the whole living space of which trembles on the verge of something that is not "a something" and that, though referred to by the name of nous (ti noeton) and being essentially related to it as its very source, remains outside of it.

This externality itself is the expression of a heuristic moment and certainly not meant as an absolute distinction since its entire force lies in the fact that as ti noeton it is certainly intimate with thought—though external to thought's characteristic attitude and function.

Hekate in Hesiod

Hekate is accorded more space in Hesiod than any god or goddess after the Muses, and cursiously so, since Hekate is an offspring of Asterïe and Perses, and they are rather low on the list of Titanic deities.

Hesiod says Zeus pays her special honor but doesn't say why. Her attributes are all innocuous and benevolent—no hint of her association with magic and her possible role in the transformation of dark powers. She is introduced in the context of Hesiod's report that Zeus promises the gods that they will keep the prerogatives they enjoyed under the Titans if they choose to support him in his war against them. Special attention perhaps is given by Hesiod to Hekate, though she is the one goddess, given her later identity, least likely to have supported Zeus. In the writings of poets not in the Hesiodic tradition she is not subject to such poetic manipulation. Her association with dark things is not a late accretion. Bacchilides (516–451 BCE) has Hekate as the direct offspring of Night, in Hesiod one of the first generation of divine beings from even before the Titans. Reread the passage about the progeny of Night and you'll see in whose grim company she would have come into being. In another genealogy (given by Apollonius of Rhodes in his *Argonautika*), she not only springs from such nocturnal

darkness, she spawns it: Scylla of Scylla and Charybdis fame in the *Odyssey* issues from her womb.

In the *Chaldean Oracles,* she is the cosmic soul giving birth to *all* the worlds, not just *nice* ones. And in the *Greek Magical Papyri,* she is sometimes invoked as Hekate Chthonia, together with Hermes Chthonia, or simply as Hermes-Hekate, as if an androgyne. Well, remember: Hesiod's poem is composed with the Helikonian Muses—daughters of Zeus who are blessed with the strikingly Hermetic virtues of mendacity as a correlate of the power to sing truly. Alertness and a certain wariness is a prerequisite for the wise entertainment of the arts. Anyway, why configure the goddess who one day would become goddess of the witches as if she were Zeus's pet granddaughter? Well, why not?—if with the assistance of the Muses you can make it stick! (Hekate is one of the few female deities mentioned by Hesiod with whom Zeus does not bed down.)

The Hounds of Hekate

In the *Oracles,* Hekate is associated with dogs, though, in the fragments we have, obscurely. There are chthonic dogs that drag one's spirit down toward its baser nature, but I have seen (unfortunately I cannot locate the source) images of Hekate where she herself is turning into or emerging from the melded bodies of two hounds. In any case, Hekate, like the North Indian Kali, the goddess outside of the Hellenic sphere she most resembles, is not (on the surface anyway) a friend to humankind. Her dogs in the *Oracles* are ravening, punishing devils, though they have divine roots and belong to the goddess herself. She is assuredly not *only* her punishing, devilish hounds, but Hekate is equally her divine hounds, *too*. Like Hekate herself, her dogs seem to possess a dual nature. Her godhead as the generatrix of the planetary worlds does not terminate at some level of her descent. *Apparent being* is Hekate's progeny all the way down. And that suggests that her practice has some affinity with the tantric traditions of India—with Kali or Durga or Smashan Tara—and with the Vajrayana of Tibet, where that which must be transformed into a divine essence goes all the way into the earthly, the underworldly, the chthonic, and the bloodthirsty.

Hermes's caduceus—two snakes entwining a vertical pole—is said to be guarded by dogs. How not to think of the kundalini serpents, the spinal canal, and the energy channels entwined about it? Like the marrow of

Hermes's turtle mentioned in the *Hymn to Hermes,* there is an esoteric current running through these mythologems. In Egypt, the term *heka* refers to the magic force that runs through all beings. It is not etymologically connected to Hekate, but as with Chronos and Kronos, the connection is irresistible. If the translinguistic pun was not experienced in antiquity, it is certainly available now!

The Noetic Mandala: Synthemata and the Configuration of Correspondences

The impulse to compose intricate systems of correspondences between features of nature and human character, as in astrology; processes among material substances and operations of the spirit, as in alchemy; between different levels of phenomena, such as the planets, the gods, the human soul, and metallic substances (sun, Apollo, personal presence, gold)—such systems developed elaborately during the Graeco-Roman-Egyptian years and continued to do so through the Middle Ages, the European Renaissance, and among Hermeticists into the present.

These schemata of correlations stem from insights and ontological commitments credible at the time of the formation of each of them. Many use a Platonic-like pattern of thought under which present conditions on Earth are consequent upon a process of emanation where a declination from an atemporally eternal state of perfection nevertheless expresses the overflowing fecundity of that state: that which is a decline from perfection is at the same time an expression of its abundant potentiality. Though perfect in itself *out* of time, *in* time that potentiality manifests as possibilities for the *awareness* of meaningful order. Again, even though that order is a declension from perfection and time is the antithesis of eternity, these schemata provide awareness with access to the ineffable, inapprehensible, eternal source that inspires them. Through these schemata, time becomes transparent to eternity and the spirit of the theurgist recovers its true nature.

How the decline from perfection is interpreted varies from context to context. In the Graeco-Roman-Egyptian world of our concern, we have Chaldean, Gnostic, Stoic, Neoplatonic, Christian, Jewish, and Hermetico-Egyptian versions of it. For Christians and Jews, the arrogance, pride, and jealousy of the initial actors in creation (Adam, Eve, and the serpent) result

in punishment and the fall of creation itself; for the Gnostic, an out-and-out rebellion among the gods, or the existence of a second force other than the creative one, results in a countercreation in which originally pure spirits are trapped in matter and the soteriological project must engineer their release. For Judaism (as later manifested in the Kabbalah), creation follows upon a contraction within the infinite resulting in the alienation of the female portion of God himself. Even within each of these developing traditions, the correspondences and schemata change from text to text and exhibit so great a prolixity of variants that one can well imagine that the revelatory incursions that inspired them did not explicitly delineate their contents but, as an aspect of their incursion, impelled their recipients to manifest; that is to say, invent them. The elaboration of a theosophical schema or indeed a full-blown metaphysical system, like the Muses' inspiration of Hesiod, occurs in the middle voice. It is selfreflective, intransitive, performative. And implicitly, configurative.

The incursive event, then, is creative in the sense that it awakens the need for ontological order. It is as if its source held back its identity or that in essence it never *had* an identity, never had an essence. To exist but without having an essence is to *court* analogy, for incursions move their recipients to give them form, which is often to be found through some analogically appropriate natural or social structure that is commonly available. To have no essence and yet *to be* is to *court* analogy. But analogy awakens belief, and belief, not brought to awareness as such—that is, experienced figuratively rather than configuratively—can block intuitive access to the incursive source because the figured analog has an essence while the source does not. But then, unbelief blocks access also, since the resonance that inspired the figure or that the figure inspired does not arise.

The qualities and virtues of objects and states—plants, animals, gemstones, metals and other minerals, local or global geographic features, meteorological phenomena, parts of the human body, the stratification of classes of persons, the categorization of entities met in dream, meditation, trance, or entheogenically induced states—were each, within their category, susceptible to organization of some sort. The picture of the cosmos as a hierarchy descending from a perfectly formed ultimate at the apex, to the more or less inchoate interaction of primitive elements at the nadir provided a generally applicable scaffolding for the correspondences between the parallel levels of the hierarchies in each region of being. Across realms

laterally you have (using the sun as an example and starting point): planet (sun), beast (lion), flower (heliotrope), metal (gold), sovereign (king or pharaoh). Or descending theologically: god, archangel, angel, saint, human, petty demon, master devil. Or socially: king, priest, noble, warrior, artisan, peasant, slave. And finally, cosmic spheres of Being: heaven with fixed stars (astrological signs), spheres of the planets, upper etheric atmosphere, common air, Earth, underworld (Tartaros, Hades, hell).

In a sense, each traditional schema is already syncretic since it assembles under a single matrix a multiplicity of systems of order and displays their correspondences. In the past century, Aleister Crowley made in his book *777* (Crowley 1973) a most ambitious attempt to assemble under a single umbrella all the systems of correspondences he knew of. That book is a veritable metamatrix, a system of correspondences between systems of correspondences, though in fact the work of creating such a metasystem was already an aspect of Hermetic orders such as the Society of the Golden Dawn. (Such a metasystem is *almost* configurative. Its apparent inclusiveness suggests that there must be more of the same.)

Since accumulation of data about nature and our ability to apply *abstract* schemata (mathematics) to that data has become infinitely more elaborate over the millennia, if we are to countenance these esoteric schemata as of any pertinence at all, we must find in them and in the spirit of their creation something other than a positive representation of existence itself. It is a forlorn business to try to insist upon the positive ontologies of bygone times. The blindly exuberant expansion of our data-accumulating and hypothesis-generating powers overruns and overwhelms any individual soul's need for perspicuous images of order. When the scientific project took off in the seventeenth century, magical thought—which, in its wisdom and at its best, depended upon schemata of correspondences—went underground. Where it competed with science it failed. But in its own basements and shadows, it persisted. You do not argue with science. You accept it as configuration within its parameters; namely, to predict and control phenomena in abstraction from direct experience of them. But there is no reasonable dialogue. The possibility of the soteriological project is included in one and mooted in the other.

Nevertheless, the traditional schemata retain a certain power to order the mind and bring it into alignment (harmony, resonance) with the world as

its categories signify them and to which a sensitive modern person can still feel an affinity. But if he or she is even minimally aware of current cosmological science, say no more than that the Milky Way is a galaxy of billions of stars of which our sun is one (and I would think it is virtually impossible not to be aware of this much), this knowledge will block belief that the fascinating system represented in the schema one is contemplating could be true—from Agrippa, Ramon Llull, John Dee, Robert Fludd, Athanasius Kircher, and others, all the way up to Éliphas Lévi and even Aleister Crowley, notwithstanding. But here is where the configurative attitude is helpful. One can configure the being of the cosmos together with one's own being as pictured in the diagrams of these masters and allow them the forms that draw one's attention to them. One need not trouble oneself with belief.

I call such a configurative-reconfiguration of a traditional schema a noetic mandala, since, like the mandalas in Tibetan Buddhism or the mandala figures created through dreams and the active imagination in Jungian psychology, their creation and contemplation activate the practitioner's relation to the perfect state of his or her own being as inseparable from the perfect state of Being itself.[*20]

Actually, not only Hermetic world systems can be reconfigured in this way. One can approach any philosophical, theosophical, and even orthodox theological system in a similar manner, taking it as if the result of an incursion of an essentially ineffable insight; for any insight, at its point of emergence, rises from ineffable Being itself, recoverable under the configurative attitude, since its emergent character appears when the positivity of its schematic result is no longer fixed upon. Yet the form of its schematic result is retained as a conduit to the insight that initiated it. What did these thinkers and visionaries see that inspired even their trenchant positivities? That question remains palpable and there for utilization in our practice and in our desire to reconfigure the Hermetic. A schema has the form it has because of the exigencies of its emergence. The configurative attitude acknowledges the historical and psychological relativity required by the modern attitude and mind but wrests from it the possibility of transforming the schema so that core contact with Being, which inspired the composition of the schema, becomes available for use, in spite of history and psychology. The ancient system of initiation can be used by modern

people to connect with Being—even though it arose within an historical context whose ideas are foreign to the modern mind, which operates in a more relativistic world. Such use, however, is possible only if its principle of correspondence can be reconfigured with more contemporarily appropriate specific and configuratively understood details. But the ancient principle that attracts one's interest as well as the principle of correspondence as such should still be honored as they are. We must not throw out the baby (correspondence) with the bathwater (specifically determined archaic categories in correspondence), since Being itself inspired the original schema. Still, the ineffability of that which is absolute should not be compromised by any amount of blatantly "effable" discourse. An allegory requires an obscure vehicle if its tenor itself is obscure.

The *synthemata* placed in nature and in the soul according to the *Chaldean Oracles* are symbols of the divine source. This is transparently so if interpreted according to the schematic context in which they are gathered, but the phenomenon is nevertheless redolent of a truth that does not require positive-figurative adherence to the conceptual details of the schema's ontology. In that sense the Neoplatonic reading of the *Oracles* is irrelevant, if not almost impertinent. There is an essential correspondence between qualities we perceive in nature and the powers in our nature to perceive them. "How we are" corresponds to how we experience that which is outside us. Psychology calls this projection, but it is a projection that flows both ways: not only from our awareness to the things of the world but also from the things of the world into and onto ourselves.

What remains true in the schemata is that the perception, affect, awareness of the qualities of natural phenomena—the awesome grandeur of the night sky, the dazzling symmetries and chromatic luminosity of gemstones, the intricate fascination of scents, the colors of atmospheric light over the course of the day or across the seasons—are simultaneously perceived within those objects and felt in one's being. They are expressions of our capacity to perceive, but simultaneously expressions of the world. Indeed, if one is consciously present to them, they qualify one's being in that moment. As philosopher and psychiatrist Karl Jaspers writes, "there is no separated duality of subjectivity and objectivity. Both are inseparably bound together. The presence of Being is in the movement which grasps and permeates subject and object simultaneously" (Jaspers 1959, 23). This is a fundamental truth of our nature and is lost in too rigorous an insistence

upon the separation of subjective from objective phenomena, as in Cartesian dualism (see “The Dissociation of the Sensibility” in chapter 8).

Though the absolute metaphysics of the Platonism behind Hermetic schemata may require revision to be effective under a consciously configured Hermetic regime, the essential truth that is embodied in them must be and, indeed, is there to be recovered.

SEVEN

"THE VISION OF ISIS" FROM THE *METAMORPHOSES* OF APULEIUS

INTRODUCTION

In Apuleius's *Metamorphoses,* often referred to as *The Golden Ass,* the speaker of the tale has been transformed into a pack animal as punishment for the libidinous profligacy of his salad days and his dabbling in *au courant* magical experiments. The book was composed in the ornate Latin of the second century CE by a North African lawyer whose biography is fairly well known owing to the fact that he was tried in Rome for the practice of magic and acquitted, acquitting himself eloquently in court, satirizing the charges against him but showing in the proceedings detailed knowledge of the magical practices of the day. His book is replete with such knowledge, and he was not beneath letting his name be bandied about as an arch magus. (The recorded charges against him detail practices well known to us from the *Greek Magical Papyri*.)

Apuleius clearly was an initiate in the Isis Mysteries current at the time. In his defense against the charges, he deflates the evidence his accusers present by showing that procedures supposedly deployed by him in base necromancy (driving a young boy to madness so as to obtain messages from the dead through the boy's crazed or charmed but, in any case, ensorcelled utterances) were practiced in a *licit* ceremony of initiation into the world of the goddess.

In Apuleius's tale, his first-person narrator, Lucius, is turned into an ass for his sexual promiscuity and his careless participation in magical procedures. He wanders through the Afro-Roman world, is bought, sold,

and used as a beast of burden, but like Odysseus's men changed into swine by Circe in the *Odyssey,* his transformation does not eradicate his consciousness as a human being, his education, or his general intelligence. He observes and describes the lives and conversations of his masters—a band of thieves, around whose campfire he hears the story of Cupid and Psyche. Apuleius's tale is its only telling in the literature of antiquity.

Eventually, his purgation by transformation approaches its terminus. Lucius the ass dreams of a theophany of the goddess Isis, who addresses him and announces that he will soon be returned to his human form and initiated into her priesthood. Lucius tells his dream in the last book of the novel and follows it with a detailed account of the ceremony of his initiation.

Isis is described in detail, and what she says to him is recited in highly poetic Latin prose typical of the era. His dream-vision of the goddess is couched largely in syncretic terms: she, whose true identity is Isis, is the divine being behind virtually all the great goddesses from around the Mediterranean.

I have rendered his dream-vision in my own free verse in an attempt to capture the lyrical richness of the Latin prose.

"THE VISION OF ISIS"

Original Greek consulted for my translation is from *Metamorphoses,* translated by J. Arthur Hanson, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1989.

. . . and then there emerged arising
from the middle of the ocean
a countenance whose beauty was
venerated even by the gods.
And little by little
her body entire
shook off the sea

and a lucid phantom vision
stood before me.

O let me try to retrieve
that miraculous splendor for you,
if the poverty of human utterance will
concede to me the faculty to discourse upon it
or if the goddess herself might supply
sumptuous enough an abundance of eloquence to sing of it.
First: her hair—
most copious, rich, inviting, and gently curled—
flowed down her goddess neck.
At the crown of her head
a crown of flowers,
intricate and various.
And at the midpoint
of her forehead
a disk in the manner of a mirror
or rather, a figure of the moon
burned white light.
To the right and to the left of it,
coils of small serpents, rearing.
And ears of Deméter's wheat,
stretched out above it.

Her garment was woven of many-colored linen,
now luminous white with dazzling candor,
now of a yellow crocus bloom,
now the flaming redness of a rose.

And something else that for some time
        inspired my deep silence—
a black mantle
with a sable luster
curling back and surrounding her,
running along her right side
and up to her left shoulder,
part of it in a flap
folding under a boss
between her breasts
but hanging in pleats
like a many-storied turret
till it flowed to its ultimate edge
in fringes, gorgeously knotted.
And woven into its border
and all over the mantle itself
trembled a plane of scattered stars
in the midst of which
the full moon
blew forth flaming fire.
Wherever the hem of that remarkable garment
                                fluttered,
you saw a chaplet
        devised
        of every kind of flower;
and every manner of fruit
clung to it entangled
within an indivisible lacing.

She carried emblematic objects

many and various:
in her right hand a bronze rattle;
and through it a narrow strip
curved back like a baldric
with a few rods drawn across it,
and it rang with subtle sonorities
as she moved her arm in triple time.

From her left hand dangled a goblet
above whose golden handle slithered an asp,
head reared high,
wide neck tumescent.
Her feet beneath her,
fragrant with ambrosia,
sported foot gear woven
from victory palms.
Such indeed was her splendor
as if she herself emitted
scents from Felix Arabia.
Once she'd completely come into her manifest
apparency
she favored me with her goddess voice:

"Excited by your entreaties, I come to you,
I, the mother of all natural things,
the mistress of the elements,
first progeny of the ages,
highest of beings numinous,
queen of the dead,
first among the celestials,

the one from whom all gods and goddesses
take their appearances.
I dispose with my nod
the luminous heights of the heavens,
the salubrious breath of the sea,
the silent solemnities of the infernal regions.
My godhead is singular
but venerated by the whole world
under innumerable apparencies
in various rites
and under a congeries of names.
Here the Phrygians, first born of humans,
know me as Pessimuntia, mother of the gods;
there the autochthonous Atticans
call me Cecropian Minerva.
The wave-washed Cyprians
have me as Paphian Aphrodite.
To the arrow-bearing Cretans
I'm Dictynna-Diana.
In Sicily where they speak in three tongues,
I am Ortygian Proserpina,
to the people of Eleusis, Demeter.
Some say I am Hera, some Bellona, some Hekate,
still others Ramnusia.
But the folk of the two Ethiopias,
who are illumined by the first rays of the sun god,
and the people of Egypt
        strong in primordial doctrine,
honor me in ceremonial

most proper to myself
and call me by my true name—
Isis, Isis Regina, Isis the Queen.

COMMENTARY ON "THE VISION OF ISIS" FROM THE *METAMORPHOSES* OF APULEIUS

Isis and Osiris

Probably the most familiar myth from ancient Egypt is the story of the conflict between four gods that rule the Egyptian cosmos: Osiris and Set, Isis and Nepthys. Osiris is the reigning sun god, though he holds his office, as it were, from a more primordial solar figure, Re or Ra. In the story of his conflict with Set, he will resign his daytime authority to his son Horus and become the god of the dead in a particularly Egyptian version: he conducts the souls of the dead and instructs them, *from* death but *in* life, regarding their proper place in the divine cosmos. But the proper ambience of Osiris is the underworld. A mummified corpse is preserved in his image. You attain your true nature as a divine being traveling in the sun boat of Osiris by "becoming" him.

The sun's diurnal decline and rebirth brings order to the cosmos that is everywhere threatened by primordially prolific but chaotic waters personified by Set, who slays Osiris and scatters his limbs over Earth. Osiris's sister-wife Isis wanders the world and, gathering his scattered parts, reanimates him sufficiently for Osiris to impregnate her with Horus, the new dawn, the sun god reborn, restoring cosmic order and peace to the civilized universe. Osiris's dismemberment parallels the sun's nocturnal journey in the underworld, so in his story we see the union between a principle of solar sovereignty (in both cosmos and state) and the inalienable intimacy between life and death that governs Epyptian soteriology. One ascends to one's own divine being by building one's tomb, since the principles of initiation are inscribed in the hieroglyphic language written on one's sarcophagus. The pharaoh's mummy and his tomb—and in later times, the mummy of anyone who could afford to be preserved in this way

—is very much more than a mausoleum or rich man's grave and memorial. It is an architectural symbol of the cosmos, of the place of the human being within it, and a graphic orchestration for one's rebirth and apotheosis as the god one is. One is oneself the reassembling of Osiris, the preparation through death for resurrection in divine form after the ordeal of dismemberment and the night journey through the *duat,* the underworld. The individual, too, must suffer the decomposition of his or her identity, to be reborn as the divine principle that is his or her eternal original.

The Isis-Osiris myth has parallels in many tales throughout the Mediterranean and Mesopotamian world, often featuring gods who die and are reborn and goddesses that wander Earth in search of a lost child, spouse, or sibling. And the pattern consists of a flourishing solar hero or deity, his untimely death, his sojourn in an underworld or his dismembered state, and his rebirth. It is the signal pattern for spiritual initiation and governs, for a few examples, the myth of Dionysos and his *sparagmos*—his being torn apart at the hands of his own maenads; the abduction of Persephone by Hades and Demeter's wandering over Earth in search of her; the wandering of the bride of Yahweh (Jehovah), the Shekinah, who is both the diaspora of the Jews and the dispersion of spiritual substance throughout fallen creation generally; and finally, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The figures of the myth play many roles in Egypt, and the story is elaborated to cover agricultural, political, familial, and personal exigencies. The antagonist, Set, is preceded by a serpent deity who, like the biblical Adam, provides attributes and identities for the things of the world but must be overcome (though he is not fully demonized, unlike the Satan serpent in the biblical story) for the fixed pattern of existence to stabilize itself. The myth of a chaotic origin is not necessarily the origin of absolute evil, though the resurfacing of chaos arouses numinous terror wherever rigid civilized patterning is challenged and the return of chaos threatens to devolve the order of things. In the earliest Egyptian accounts, the principle of order itself is the sister of the male principle of life, so there is a sense of a primordial goddess as matrix—both mother and pattern—for the organized multiplicity of manifest phenomena and as enjoying consanguinity with the vital principle itself. Still, that which precedes cosmic order—unbridled creativity, prolixity, and ontic wealth—may seem to require taming by forces that combine cosmic pattern and the policing of human societies by a cosmically legitimized monarch and his state.

The inalienable richness of the primordial chaos must not be eliminated, and at the same time must have order imposed upon it. Something of this complex of things was clearly in evidence in Hesiod's *Theogony,* but remains pertinent in the Hellenistic and Roman world under the figure of the Great Goddess, Isis, and her resonance with and absorption of the many goddess figures from surrounding cultures. In general, cosmic myths vacillate between those which valorize the matricial creativity of the primordial and those that lionize the paternal rule, between essentially matriarchal cosmologies hospitable to free if unruly creativity and patriarchal theogonies that fixate on law and order. But this dichotomy is not absolute, for not only profligacy but also patterning may stem from the goddess. Primordial creativity is not chaotic, for the ordered apparencies of the phenomenal world may have their source in the primordial, as witnessed in the early Egyptian story that it is a serpent that provided the essences to all that exists.

Be that as it may, in Lucius's vision of Isis—though something of the universal mother-matrix goddess is indicated—is that of an erotically striking goddess of death who seems to have an authority of her own, which announces itself through her extraordinary image. Lucius's vision exhibits an extravagant push to realize extreme tokens of sublime beauty: the radiant blackness of her shawl; her extravagant beauty as inseparable from her tantalizingly intimate aura of danger, particularly the asps adjacent to the image of her moon, not at all a moon of hazy moony moonlight but rather a blazing white fire fringed with those little serpents rearing to strike.

Isis is perennially associated with the moon as sister-bride of Osiris, who is sometimes the sun, but a sun that dies in the evening and is reborn diurnally and is more the god of the underworld than the radiant monarch of noonday sunlight. Sun and moon in alchemy represent the fundamental division of an inexpressible, image-less, primordial Being into a pair of opposites, given as antithetical but essentially erotically coordinated principles: blazing yang (to borrow an apt Chinese parallel), masculine, hot, solar, active—radiant daylight; shadowy yin, feminine, cool, lunar, quiescent and tranquilly receptive—nocturnal luminescence. The moon is the antithesis of the sun by a series of properties that reinforce her shadowy, antithetical visual quality: she has a dark side that no one sees (until, like so

many things celestial, invaded by the robot cameras of astrophysical prurience); her light is not her own but reflected from the sun. As she courses about Earth her angular relation to the sunlight changes so that her phases are essentially equipped by her own shadow. Her very being is changeable, unlike the constant blazing of the sun, but her very changes are brought under a cyclical regimen: twenty-eight degrees of moonlight from dark to full and back to dark again, or conversely, from brightness to darkness to rebirth. Her phases entrain the course of sublunary life itself: from birth through growth to full maturity, then stepwise though continuous, gradual decline. And of course, under eclipse, she is enveloped by Earth's vast shadow.

But in Lucius's vision of Isis, the whiteness of her light is uncanny because, however bright, it is a *reflected* brilliance and that very reflectivity conceals yet at the same time intimates a hidden fury, an authority not associable to mere reflection. Is her authority only that of the sun's, cast through the properties of its opposite? Or is it the authority of the invisible source of both sun and moon, all the more mysterious because seemingly mediated by absence, reflection, and occultation itself? In any case, in Lucius's vision, Isis recognizes no hierarchical hypostasis above her, and she seems to mediate, if anything, the authority of Being, without dependence upon any solar partnership and certainly without subordination to a male counterpart.

In our hymn, Lucius attempts to discourse upon what he sees in his dream-vision of Isis and to detail her fully developed lunar attributes. Only here, what strikes Lucius is that the two images of the moon—as a mirror diadem and as an image on her radiantly sable mantle—are both blazing white fire. The mantle's blackness stuns Lucius to silence, as if its black pigment, which has the capacity to absorb all light, exposed an unexpected lunar essence that does not reflect but absorbs luminosity and produces an image of blackness that further brightens the already blazing radiance of Isisian moonlight, and exacerbates the magical quality of the small coiling asps. Absorption and reflection, though opposites, reinforce each other and intensify a solemn mystery, as if that which has the power to absorb everything were the primordial witness or source to a power whose mark is a darkly radiant, unapproachable beauty.

The goddess herself mentions that Hekate is one of the names under which she is known, and she associates herself explicitly with Persephoneia (Persephone Latinized) and Demeter of Eleusis. Persephoneia is, of course, the captured bride of Hades. Once accustomed to her role as queen of the underworld, she becomes a terrifying figure, whose attention, for instance, Odysseus, in his stay in the underworld, is afraid to attract, lest she force him to look at the gorgon Medousa, one glimpse at whom will turn a man to stone. Persephone possesses a beauty that is inseparable from her identity with death. She is death as a goddess, and she possesses an uncanny erotic aura.

I have included in a section below notes on Eros and Persephone, which, I think, have an essential resonance with Lucius's Isis, for like Persephone and Hades, Isis and Osiris are gods of the dead. All these deities resonate with mysteries from beyond life and death, which day-time deities are incapable of. But first a few more comments about Lucius's situation and the lunar forces that govern it.

Isis and the Moon

It is as if Lucius's youthful indiscretion created the very conditions for broadening his experience with the underworld of human life, far different from his privileged upbringing in an affluent and politically prominent family: his father was a mayor in a prosperous North African town, as I mentioned. The preparation for his initiation into the Isis cult and the inauguration of his life as a priest of the goddess involves this expansion of his knowledge of the world.

The moon in the general cosmology of late antiquity is the principle that regulates growth and organic transformation—generation and death—throughout nature. She is seen to do this through the regularity of her phases and her mysterious pull on the ocean tides, even generating the pulsations of psychic life through inorganic matter: metals and stones.

The moon would be the divine principle closest to life itself, but all the different psychic energies governed by the other planets would fall under her sway. Though the sublunary world is the lowest in the cosmic hierarchy of psychic forces, it mediates and in a sense rules them all.

Lucius's sojourn in the body of an ass to check his youthful promiscuity and casual dabbling in the black arts prepares him for an initiation in which

both magic and eros are intertwinedly sublimated; for Isis by no means disengages Lucius's fascination with the mysteries: she deepens it. And while no doubt bridling his characteristic male raunchiness, she does not erase it but gives us, through his vision of her, an extraordinarily dangerous but erotically charged image.

Eros and Persephone

Persephone's alienated eroticism effuses erotic forms that fuse attraction and danger, lust and forms of violence complicit against lust's satisfactions. Compare the erotic character of Persephone with other young goddesses in the Olympian system. Athena is unapproachable; her eros is utterly out of play. Artemis exudes an aura of erotic attraction, but she vanquishes even her own devotees if they dare to approach her. Persephone's inviolability, however, is contingent, not essential. The forms of eros to which she gives rise are compounded with the ethos of death. One can imagine the succubus, the ghostly female that satisfies a dreamer's lust only to drain him of his vitality; the vampire, who craves living blood like the ghost souls in the Homeric House of Hades; or the dominatrix, who requires craven submission of her lovers—all as declensions of Persephonean eros. The liberation of Persephone in the Mysteries (I among others have imagined that the Mysteries liberate the gods, not only their initiates) would, presumably, relieve the ghastly tension in these forms and reveal their hidden spiritual dimension. To see that there is such a dimension one has only to recall the forms of goddess worship in Hindu Tantra, where Kali, Durga, and Smashan Tara draw into the ambience of "transgressive sacrality,"[*21] a like ethos of death—embibing blood, opening one's being to pathological states, worshipping in cemeteries, hazarding and acclimating oneself to the proximity of corpses.

Persephone's beauty is precisely legendary—no one can find her to see her—so she inspires powerful fantasies, which may begin with the imagination of the innocent girl, the Korê, but lead inexorably to a willingness to enter into death to attain her. (One of Psyche's tasks, in the story of Cupid and Psyche that Lucius hears told among his cut-purse masters is to "retrieve Persephone's beauty in a box"!)

The two forms of Persephone's nature share an inaccessible erotic core. The Korê in her innocence is not yet a maturely erotic woman, and the

queen of the dead is accessible only to Death himself as a lover. To possess the queen of the dead is to engage with an identity that transcends the living. One must become Death to have her. But to become Death is not the same thing as to die. It is to perform an operation that implies an acquaintance with a configuration of death that in complementing the living knows something beyond both. Beyond life and death—as beyond day and night—is the hint of Being itself that we took from Parmenides.

The erotic springs from a division in the appearances that Being gives rise to and that conventionally expresses itself in oppositional pairs—male and female, day and night, sun and moon. But the shift in consciousness that allows for the consummation of the *hieros gamos,* the sacred marriage, involves a recognition that these pairs in fact are themselves the veil of a unity that manifests in a subtler duality wherein the conjoined pair has something other than an oppositional sense. Being and Apparency, as we saw in our Parmenides chapter, is a figure that can neither resolve to a one nor to a two. To be Hades, then, in order to wed Persephone, or to be Persephone, wedded to Hades, bespeaks an identity beyond life and death in which to be the one is already to be the other. Hades is drawn to Persephone and she to him as Being is inescapably the author of all Apparency and that which seems must seem to be.

Eros, we might remember, in the Hesiodic memory of an ontogeny prior to the Olympian dispensation, suffuses a primordial chasm whose quality is that it does give rise through a kind of hunger to the sources of all that will come to appear. First Earth and night issue from hunger and space. The first things hunger for further nature and produce it. But the chasm chaos and its erotic function remain to instill in its creations a similar avidity for production. Things diverge from there. What begins as symmetry quickly digresses. But the original unity and its internally asymmetrical duality offer themselves at every point as liberative resource.

EIGHT

"ON DIVINE VIRTUE" BY ZOSIMOS OF PANOPOLIS

INTRODUCTION

Zosimos was an Egyptian alchemist of the fourth century BCE, probably practicing in Alexandria. He authored many texts, a few of which survive in the original Greek. Others were transmitted to Arab countries, were translated into Arabic, and became an essential part of the transmission of alchemy to the Muslim world.

The question of the spiritual provenance of alchemy has been disputed, largely because of Jung's emphasis upon it. Carl Jung spent the later years of his career collecting, writing about, and commenting upon alchemical literature and practice, providing an in-depth interpretation of it in terms of his own archetypal psychology. In *Alchemical Studies* (volume 13 of Jung's *Collected Works*) he devotes an essay to the study of Zosimos, which focuses on the text translated here. The Jungian reading of alchemy saw in it a spontaneous projection of the collective unconscious, focusing on its imagery and the enigmatic textual expressions with which its procedures were cognized and recorded, somewhat at the expense of its material operations, though this tends to be exaggerated by writers who wish to emphasize the opposite. It is perfectly evident from this early text of Zosimos that alchemy transformed the *artifex* (the alchemist) as well as the substances with which he worked from the very beginning.

Zosimos hailed from Panopolis (the city of Pan, now modern Akhmim) in southern Egypt dedicated to the deity Min, whom the Greeks identified with Pan. It has been argued recently that Zosimos himself trained in metallurgy in temple workshops at Panopolis as an artisan-priest. Mircea

Eliade demonstrated years ago that the origins of alchemy lie in metallurgy, the refinement of metallic ores through purgation in furnaces and through purification by protochemical means (Eliade 2000). Such operations were part of Egyptian temple practice since metals used in creating images of the gods required curing, coloring, and the realization of other qualities to manifest their sacred function. The temple metallurgist did not only sculpt the traditional form of the god, he also prepared his materials in what was as much a sacred ceremony as a technical procedure. Divine qualities were called into or called from the metallic ores, through paying subtle and continuous attention to qualities emergent in the working. The temple metallurgist had to be able to allow (middle-voice) the god to inhabit his work: the very being of the deity was correlated with his appearance in his image, so the metallurgist was a hierophant, literally an artisan who allowed the sacred thing (*hiero*) to come to apparency (*phano*).

The very hallmark of alchemy is paying subtle and continuous attention to qualities emergent in the working. The development and practice of such attention transforms the alchemist simultaneously with the materials worked upon. It is no accident that the alchemists called themselves artists with practices congruent with that of some painters, sculptors, and musicians in the modern world. Not only philosophers and poets contrive to heal the "dissociation of the sensibility" (see commentary below). The analogy between art and alchemy, where precisely such dissociation does not occur, is eminently apposite.

Since the alchemist is concerned to realize qualities that manifest the way the divine as such belongs to the material world, there would seem to be a clear continuity between temple metallurgy and alchemical practice.

In our text from Zosimos, alchemy is a process of initiation in which the artifex (alchemist) goes back and forth between working with material substances and attending dreams and meditations. Zosimos finds that in the latter, the significance of his work is sometimes directly and sometimes symbolically imparted. Zosimos works his metals, has dreams, interprets his dreams, and applies his interpretation to his work.

"ON DIVINE VIRTUE"

This text was translated for the first time, I believe, in an early issue of *Ambix* magazine. I found the Greek text in a volume in the Columbia University Library, for which I no longer have the reference. I made the translation in 1964, and it appeared in my one issue magazine, *Aion, A Journal of Traditionary Science,* and was reprinted in *The Alchemical Tradition* edited by Richard Grossinger.

PRAXIS A

[1] The composition of the waters, and the movement and the growth, and the removal and restitution of bodily nature, and the splitting off of the spirit from the body, and the fixation of the spirit on the body—are not operations with natures alien one from the other but, like the hard bodies of metals and the moist fluids of plants, are One Thing, of One Nature, acting upon itself. And in this system, of one kind but many colors, is preserved a research of all things, multiple and various, subject to lunar influence and measure of time, which regulates the cessation and growth by which the One Nature transforms itself.

[2] And saying these things, I slept, and I saw a certain sacrificing priest standing before me and over an altar which had the form of a bowl. And that altar had fifteen steps going up to it. Then the priest stood up, and I heard from above a voice say to me, “I have completed the descent of the fifteen steps and the ascent of the steps of light. And it is the sacrificing priest who renews me, casting off the body’s coarseness, and, consecrated by necessity, I have become a spirit.” And when I had heard the voice of him who stood in the altar formed like a bowl, I questioned him, desiring to understand who he was. He answered me in a weak voice saying, “I am Ion, priest of the Adytum, and I have borne an intolerable force. For someone came at me headlong in the morning and dismembered me with a sword and tore me apart, according to the rigor of harmony. And, having cut off my head with a sword, he mashed my flesh with my bones and burned them in the fire of the treatment, until, my body transformed, I should learn to become a spirit. And I sustained the same intolerable force.” And even as he said these

things to me and I forced him to speak, it was as if his eyes turned to blood and he vomited up all his flesh. And I saw him as a mutilated image of a little man, and he was tearing at his flesh and falling away.

[3] And being afraid I woke and considered, “Is this not the composition of the waters?” I thought that I was right and fell asleep again. And I saw the same altar in the shape of a bowl, and water bubbled at the top of it, and in it were many people endlessly. And there was no one whom I might question outside of the bowl. And I went up to the altar to view the spectacle. And I saw a little man, a barber, whitened with age, and he said to me, “What are you looking at?” I answered that I wondered at the boiling water and the men who were burning but remained alive. And he answered me saying, “The spectacle that you see is at once the entrance and the exit and the process.” I questioned him further. “What is the nature of the process?” And he answered saying, “It is the place of the practice called embalming. Men wishing to obtain virtue enter here and, fleeing the body, become spirits.” I said to him, “And are you a spirit?” And he answered saying, “Both a spirit and a guardian of spirits.” As he was saying these things to me, and as the boiling increased and the people wailed, I saw a copper man holding a lead tablet in his hand. He spoke aloud, looking at the tablet, “I counsel all those in mortification to become calm and that each take in his hand a lead tablet and write with his own hand and that each bear his eyes upward and open his mouth until his grapes be grown.” The act followed the word, and the master of the house said to me, “Have you stretched your neck up and have you seen what is done?” And I said that I had, and he said to me, “This man of copper whom you have seen is the sacrificial priest and the sacrifice and he who vomited out his own flesh. To him was given authority over the water and over those men in mortification.”

[4] And when I had seen these visions, I woke again and said to myself, “What is the cause of this vision? Is this not the white and yellow water, boiling, sulphurous, divine?” And I found that I

understood well. And I said that it was good to speak and good to hear and good to give and good to receive and good to be poor and good to be rich. And how does the Nature learn to give and to receive? The copper man gives and the water-stone receives; the thunder gives the fire that flashed from it. For all things are woven together and all things are taken apart and all things are mingled and all things combined and all things mixed and all things separated and all things are moistened and all things are dried and all things bud and all things blossom in the altar shaped like a bowl. For each, by method and by weight of the four elements, the interlacing and separation of the whole is accomplished, for no bond can be made without method. The method is natural, breathing in and breathing out, keeping the orders of the method, increasing and decreasing. And all things by division and union came together in a harmony, the method not being neglected, the Nature is transformed. For the Nature turning on itself is changed. And the Nature is both the nature of the virtue and the bond of the world.

[5] And, so that I need not write to you of many things, friend, build a temple of one stone, like ceruse, like alabaster, like marble of Proconessus in appearance, having neither beginning nor end in its building. Let it have within a pure stream of water glittering like sunlight. Notice on what side the entry to the temple is and take your sword in hand and seek the entry. For thin-mouthed is the place, where the opening is, and a serpent lies by it guarding the temple. First seize him in your hands and make a sacrifice of him. And having skinned him, cut his flesh from his bones, divide him, member from member, and having brought together again the members and the bones, make them a stepping-stone at the entry to the temple and mount upon them and go in, and there you will find what you seek. For the priest whom you see seated in the stream gathering his color is not a man of copper. For he has changed the color of his nature and become a man of silver whom, if you wish, after a little time, you will have as a man of gold.

PRAXIS B

[1] Then, again I wished to ascend the seven steps and to behold the seven mortifications, but, as it happened, on one day only did I ascend the way. Retracing my steps, I thereupon ascended the way many times. And on returning, I could not find the way, and becoming discouraged, not seeing how to get out, I fell asleep. And I saw in my sleep a certain little man, a “barber,” wearing a red robe and royal garments, and he stood outside of the place of the mortifications and said, “What are you doing, Man?” I said to him, “I stand here because I have missed every road and am lost.” He said, “Follow me.” And going out, I followed him. And being near to the place of the mortifications, I saw the little barber man leading me, and he cast himself into the place of the mortifications, and his whole body was consumed by fire.

[2] Seeing this, I fled and trembled from the fear and I woke, and said to myself, “What is this that I have seen?” And again I took thought and determined that this barber man is the Man of Copper. It is necessary for the first step to throw him into the place of mortifications. My soul again desired to ascend—the third step also. And again, alone, I went along the way, and as I drew near the place of mortifications, again I got lost, losing sight of the path, and stood, out of my mind.

[3] And again I saw an old man of hair so white my eyes were blinded by the whiteness. His name was Agathodaemon. And the white old man, turning, looked on me for a whole hour. And I asked him, “Show me the right way.” He did not turn toward me but hastened to go on the right way. And going and coming in this manner, he quickly effected the altar. As I went up to the altar, I saw the white old man. He was cast into the mortifications. O Creator gods of celestial natures—straightway the flames took him up entire, which is a terrible story, my brother. From the great energy of the mortifications, his eyes became full of blood. And I questioned him saying, “Why do you lie there?” And he opened his mouth and said, “I am the man of lead and I am withstanding an intolerable force.” And then I woke out of fear and sought in

myself the cause of this fact. And again I reflected and said to myself, “I understand well that thus must one cast out the lead—truly the vision is concerning the combination of liquids.”

PRAXIS G

And again I knew the theophany and again the sacred altar, and I saw a certain priest clothed in white celebrating those same terrible mysteries, and I said, “Who is this?” And answering he said to me, “This is the priest of the Adytum. He wishes to put blood into the bodies, to make the eyes clear, and to raise up the dead.” And again I fell asleep for a while, and while I was mounting the fourth step, I saw one with a sword in his hand coming out of the east. And I saw another behind him holding a disk, white and shining and beautiful to behold. And it was called the meridian of the sun, and I approached the place of the mortifications, and the one who held the sword said to me, “Cut off his head and sacrifice his meat and muscles part by part so that first the flesh may be boiled according to the method and that he might suffer the mortifications.” And waking, I said, “I understand well that these matters concern the liquids of the art of the metals.” And the one who held the sword said, “You have fulfilled the seven steps beneath.” And the other said at the same time as the casting out of the lead by all the liquids, “The Work is completed.”

COMMENTARY ON “ON DIVINE VIRTUE”

The Retroflection of Quality in Technical and Theoretical Hermetica

It has been fashionable in recent scholarship to divide the *Hermetica* in two groups, philosophical Hermetic writings, such as the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the Stobaeus collection, and technical *Hermetica*—texts that instruct in concrete magical procedures, such as those gathered in the *Greek Magical*

Papyri. I don't myself find the distinction helpful. The so-called philosophical *Hermetica* often make use of extended figures that depend on knowledge of the material crafts developed in the so-called technical texts.

Praxis A, 2, for instance, involves a giant krater or mixing bowl that is on the one hand based on the traditional object for mixing intoxicating beverages but also for the more general operation of combining material liquids in alchemical processes. In our Zosimos text, which involves the transformation of both the alchemist and his metallic substances, a krater functions as a sacrificial altar whereupon the essential transmutation takes place. Even the *word* "technical" is misleading, since it suggests that such operations are exclusively concerned with producing well-defined and preconceived results. But in a Hermetic context, the craft transmutes the craftsman. There is method, but precisely therein lies the mystery. In fact, an early term for a technical procedure is, indeed, *mystery*. It would be enlightening to study the history of the transformation of mystery into technology in some detail.

The acquisition of a craft identifies the new craftsperson with the capacity associated with that craft but also retroflects the qualities of its objects and activities back into him or her. A person who practices or theorizes about physical phenomena is a physicist and his or her mind itself takes on to some extent the kind of intelligence employed in physics; one who deploys cryptanalysis to encrypt and decrypt code is a cryptologist, medicine a medic, poetry a poet. But similarly, a person who casts spells or attracts incorporeal apparitions with sigils and talismans is a sorcerer or magician. But so is one who uses very similar operations to elevate his consciousness through calling forth his genius or angelic counterpart in Iamblichian theurgy. Certainly, the kind of mentality necessary to perform magical operations—its particular amalgamation of concepts, images, relations to material objects and living beings—accrues to the working magus. The training in a craft involves the conditioning in this sense of the craftsperson's mind, transforming his or her identity in intimate and essential ways.

In each case the attribution of identity is not merely nominal or categorial; it is not just an evaluation of the ego of the person, by others or by himor herself. It involves the transformation of a person into a being qualified by the qualities internal to the acts he or she habitually performs

and that transformation is not necessarily limited to the practical efficacy of the individual's performances. Of course it involves self-approbation, self-castigation, pride and shame, and so forth relative to success. But that is not all it involves. It is not particularly these judgments that qualify the action as being an action of the specific craft and thus of the person as a worker of or in it. A physicist whose experiment fails is still a physicist, and a theorist that is proven wrong is still a theorist. A bad poet is still a poet. But the mind of the physicist is itself qualified by the concepts he constructs or inherits; the poet's being is colored by the qualities she is able to elicit for her poems.

The same is true of the caster of spells and the often quite complex dramatic performances, sometimes involving days of disciplined activities —abstinences, incantations, meditations, the creation of statues or other kinds of images or inscriptions. One can see how the very character of the magician's consciousness and being are affected by these operations.

Again, the point is not about identity in the sense of the exhibition of the criteria pertinent to that identity. A modern skeptic might point out that the difference between a sculptor and a magician is that even a bad sculpture inflicts real changes on metal, clay, or stone, but the magician—whose skill according to the skeptic is pertinent to nothing at all—*changes* nothing at all. But the contrast is actually not apt. If the sculptor is a temple priest-artisan, for instance, his craft is not satisfied with the physical changes he effects in his material; the skeptic's attention does not find the actual concern of the working. What the metallurgist achieves is something far more offensive to the scoffer than material imposture. *The craft must bring the god into the stone*. The qualitative changes wrought in limestone or granite must be such that a devotee will sense the very presence of the deity. The evidence for the *existence* of the deity is the manifest incursion of that quality, as felt by the god's devotee, who of course will not be concerned with evidence at all, but with pursuing the relationship with the entity conjured. The magician effects not only the circumstance to be influenced, but his own being as well.

In alchemy, the methods for transforming metals—in our text from copper or lead into silver or gold—are apparently inscrutable: the very antithesis of manuals for technical procedures. And the inscrutability of the alchemical recipes is not a defect. The practitioner must again and again

become lost and again and again find his or her way, through the method and the process. Inscrutability belongs to method and process essentially and should indicate to us that the success of the alchemical operation—even when what is at stake is the material production of a particular quality or essence in the chemical matter—cannot be reached by merely following technical instructions accurately but routinely. Perplexity and at least the image of extreme suffering are inseparable from the nature of the operation. Method works upon the consciousness of the alchemist, for it affects the intensity of will, the powers of concentration and visualization, the inner capacity to evoke qualities of being that are fostered and guarded by the work.

Alchemy had its origin in close proximity to temple metallurgy, and temple metallurgy involved bringing certain qualities—colors, textures, reflective properties—into the metals that were to carry the presence of the god. Alchemy in a sense generalizes and sublimates *telestics,* the art of causing an object to be inhabited by a deity. The alchemist attends the substances and, through the mutual transformation of the being of those substances and the alchemist's attention, he or she waits for the latent virtue of the substance to reveal itself. Matter is imbued with divine latencies. Alchemy brings them out. But so, too, regarding the alchemist's soul. The soul is imbued with divine latencies. Alchemy unfurls them.

I think that the seemingly mundane operations of the so-called technical *Hermetica* given in the *Greek Magical Papyri* are continuous with alchemy on the one hand and with the higher operations of the spirit involved in more exalted theurgic ceremonials on the other. These ceremonies of the post-Iamblichean Neoplatonists, in turn, are associable with the spiritual ascent indicated in the *Poimandres* and other *Hermetica.*

In the *Poimandres,* the process of transformation is in and of the mind of the practitioner, but the mind both in the *Poimandres* and in alchemy covers the entire gamut of cognitive occurrences and capacities, from the raw identification of sensuous data to the uncovering of one's being in its divine actuality. The alchemist allows the inessential admixtures to burn away in the furnace; the hermetic initiate allows the dynamic psychic forces connected to the planets to return to the planetary spheres whence they came. In the alembic, the pure essence of the substance appears. In the spirit

of the Hermeticist, the true identity of the intelligence crystallizes and owns itself as having its nature from a sphere beyond the planetary gods.

In the *Poimandres,* Hermes is puzzled that the deathless character of the individual will only manifest for one who has the direct knowledge of his immortal nature. Clearly, that knowledge, though imparted verbally by the discarnate entity that is speaking with Hermes, is not simply a matter of understanding and assenting to Poimandres's words. It involves a direct introduction to that state itself. The content of the thoughts imparted are not separable from the events of their reception. Hermes must not only understand and affirm what the mind imparts to him; he must also grasp it intuitively and identify his own intelligence with the intuition thus aroused.

The Dissociation of the Sensibility

Students of European literature from the seventeenth century onward are aware of the influence of the beginnings of modern science on human experience under T. S. Eliot's phrase "the dissociation of sensibility" (Eliot 1951, 281–91), which is the bifurcation of the individual and the world itself into two distinct categories, subjectivity and objectivity, whose inseparability previously formed the basis of an integral ontology. The succinct formulation of this dissociation is Descartes's two-substance ontology: (1) *Res cogitans*—a matter (*res*) or substance whose entire function is thinking (*cogitans*). This is not in space and time and is not susceptible to quantitative measurement. (2) *Res extensa*—a matter or substance (*res*) whose being is extended (*extensa*) in space and time and can be measured precisely. Thinking is understood somewhat confusedly both as conceptual thought and as sense perception. In the latter, one knows directly that which one attends to sensuously, but where the knowing takes precedence over the sensation and so, like concept, is not in space and time and not measurable. *Res cogitans* stands for consciousness but with emphasis on cognitive content rather than sentience or pure awareness.

Thought and extended matter together make up reality. Our notion of the Hermetic Genius as intelligent sentience or sentient intelligence—that is, pure awareness as existent at the eternal Now, *in* time but not *of* time—was nowhere in the picture. We continue in a confusion when we are unclear about whether we mean by "consciousness" sentience as awareness in the Now or the possession of adequate conceptual understanding. *Res*

cogitans has no extended being at all. It has no now. It is incorporeal—bodiless—and dwells in what I have called quasior pseudo-atemporality. Thought itself is timeless, but thought in some sense includes sentience and sentience is sentient of what happens in time: hence, thought is quasi-atemporal. *Res extensa* is corporeal and unconscious; that is, insentient. It is possessed of neither intelligence nor awareness. Its entire being is taken up by its extended character, its measurable, quantitative properties.

Natural science would henceforth (after Descartes) require that whatever is to be considered existent must belong to one or the other of these categories. The task of science and philosophy in general would be, after determining its object under investigation, to analyze it into component parts and provide unambiguous terms for those parts so that they might be evaluated quantitatively by precise, mathematically governed operations. How these two aspects of existence fit together would become the inescapable subject of philosophical debate and continues to be so today. Although the desire to overcome Cartesian dualism has been on the intellectual agenda almost from the beginning, the two-substance ontology continues to divide culture itself into two compartments: one dealing with human experience and specializing in representing subjectivity (literature, the arts, and religion) and one dealing with objective reality (science and technology).

Hermes transcends, heals, bypasses, overcomes, or simply refuses the dissociation of the sensibility. Celebration and invocation of his Genius commits one to doing so. But Hermes's trickster spirit realizes the deleterious consequences of *failing* to do so, or believing one has done so when one has neither undergone the intellectual work nor the spiritual practice to be a fair witness to nondual awareness. Recovering a Hermetic perspective—not in the sense of going back to a condition prior to the advent of science but in moving ahead to one that incorporates and integrates science as among its possibilities—would seem to be imperative. But of this there are certain inescapable caveats.

In thinking about Zosimos's "On Divine Virtue," we are taking alchemy as exemplary of the Hermetic project. Alchemy, of course, is for the most part a thing of the past (though I am aware that there exist practitioners of alchemy even today for whom it is anything but protoscience), and yet through the contemplation of its methods, aims, and ontological

implications and its language, cues for the further life of the Hermetic Genius are at hand. The practice of alchemy precedes the dissociation of the sensibility historically, but something of its Hermetic spirit calls to us for renewal. And yet alchemy *intends* its own obscurity, presents itself not only as a method to be followed but also as lost or hidden knowledge to be *re*-covered, not only *dis*-covered. Alchemy cannot be known except in terms of a secret that must not too peremptorily be brought to the light. To discover it is to keep it *covered,* to protect its essentially secret nature, even in its disclosure (Wolfson 2019).

The thinker that most aggressively asserts that Being reveals itself only through a "sheltering" in concealment is Martin Heidegger, particularly in *Being and Time* and *Contributions to Philosophy* (Heidegger 1962; 1999). Elliot R. Wolfson, one of the most significant hemeneuts of Jewish kabbalistic thought at work today, has shown how essential principles of Lurianic Kabbalah[*22] parallel Heidegger in precisely this respect: that that which is disclosed of Being happens under veils and garments of concealment; and that the "Ultimate principle" ceases to be apparent in the event that renders it apparent. Or again, as the "Death of God" theologian Thomas J. J. Altizer has it, God's presence today occurs in or even *as* his absence (Altizer 1993). I believe Wolfson's use of Heidegger to expound Lurianic Kabbalah and conversely his use of the Kabbalah to unpack Heidegger could be applied to other apophatic traditions, in particular to the Hermeticism of alchemy and the *Hermetica*.

The Impossibility of Alchemy

Today, alchemical texts from the many nations where alchemy took root are being disinterred from dusty libraries, translated, and explained. Not many decades ago even the academic study of alchemical texts for purely historical reasons was, if not actually taboo, definitely looked upon with eyebrows raised. Magic and alchemy were not even in the rearview mirror of scientific probity; even to glance at old alchemical texts rendered one suspect. Even to read the incomprehensible gobbledeegook of the ignorant and venal charlatans who thought they could transmute base elements into gold and thus increase their own wealth or supply unwary princes with the specie needed to finance their wars was to risk exclusion from the company of "reasonable men" (Hanegraaff 2012).

A change in this attitude has all but swept academe, and the publications of alchemical texts today usually are accompanied by introductions extolling the probity of alchemical experimentation as genuine, proto-empirical science. Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton worked at it. The careful, scholarly decryption of vague alchemical instructions makes it possible to perform alchemical experiments in modern laboratories. You can see for yourself just what blew the minds of the alchemists by following their recipes, combining their substances in proper proportions, observing temperatures, counting cycles of distillation. Do it right and behold! A crystal flower appears in the alembic just as that brownish vapor vanishes; a chemical star glitters above the gurgling broth. Or some such.

But the alchemists' own demands that these operations be performed with the right spiritual attitude and with carefully calculated, astrological timing are ignored. Reconstructed alchemical procedures are conducted in a spirit of bemused curiosity and perhaps even wonder at the spectacle, but there is no expectation that the being of the post-doc or full professor in a lab coat will be spiritually transmuted or perfected in the process. With scientific procedure we have grown beyond all that. We are not concerned with our souls. Leave it to the theologians. (The dissociation of the sensibility is alive and kicking!)

No doubt there was a genuine transitional period in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries during which the search for what would become the true combinatorial structure of molecular chemistry was *in nuce,* in a nutshell. When I first read that Isaac Newton had spent decades working with alchemical apparatus and materials, it seemed clear to me that he would have been trying to model chemical transformations mathematically, just as he had modeled the movements of the planetary bodies in establishing a firm groundwork for modern physics. He was just about a hundred years too early. I refer you to Lawrence M. Principe (2013) in the bibliography to learn how much this is or isn't the whole story of Newton's involvement with alchemy. But even if this is the whole story of these unimpugnable men of science dabbling or more than dabbling in alchemical experiments, this does not mean that alchemy at its root was nascent modern science. The very terms of understanding—or *not* understanding—differed markedly.

The alchemists worked *per impossibile,* to achieve what was not possible. They performed what could not be done—even from within their own conception. If the simple combination of hot, cold, wet, and dry—the four qualities to which the alchemical elements (air, water, fire, and earth, plus ether) could be reduced—were clearly determinable, alchemy would be little more than cookery. If understanding these qualities and elements were sufficient basis for the transmutation of metals, the questions of mastery, adepthood, and ontological secrecy would be moot. You would not have to be a magus to be an alchemist.

If we seek the ontological atmosphere that comprehends the arcane character of alchemy, the following is a common but completely *inadequate* statement of the situation: that the alchemist worked in *ignorance* of the fact that performing the Great Work (finding the philosopher's stone, producing alchemical gold) was impossible. They labored in ignorance of what modern chemistry knows: that the chemical world was then as now composed of one hundred or more elements in the modern sense and these elements were then as now incapable of transmutation without intervention at the nuclear level.

The inadequacy lies in an ambiguity in the meaning of ignorance. Under the framework of modern chemistry, ignorance is that into which scientific research makes inroads. Science is genuine knowledge. It grows. Ignorance is precisely not yet being in possession of such knowledge. But for the alchemist, our ignorance pertains either to knowledge that was once available but has been lost, or knowledge that is hidden in nature and has to be uncovered. Hiddenness itself is part of an ontological conspectus. It is not that Being as a whole is unknown or knowable. It is *recoverable,* capable of being revealed. Its recovery is one with the alchemical magnum opus, the Great Work. But such knowledge is not knowledge of objectivity, nor is its gnosis limited to intuitive, psychological insight, though intuition surely is our best shot at a term for it. Rather it springs from the very being of the alchemist and his or her *harmonic* relation with the being of nature. Intuitive gnosis is the possibility of that harmonic. Harmony has arithmetic properties as the Pythagoreans knew very well, but it is an arithmetic of *proportionality,* of the role of quantitative proportions in manifesting the qualities of things, their properties as pertinent to experienced value. It is not about the determination of absolute quantities as such. It is as much a

feeling for proportion (though certainly not exclusively that) as it is a *counting off* of extended units.

Modern science and philosophy since the time of Plato always seek to disentangle ambiguous terms. Terms must be univocal, one term to one denotation, for this is the requirement for measurability. You cannot count objects whose category shifts midcount. Alchemical terms abjure this univocity, often relishing multiple meanings for the same term, and alchemy also relishes the inversion of this: many terms for a single meaning, a meaning whose referent is ineffable, impossible of univocal denotation. The terms *prima materia* (first matter), *philosophical mercury,* and *lapis philosophorum* (philosopher's stone) in any given text may indicate the same entity. Like the Being of Parmenides, the secret of the alchemists, though indivisible, both manifests in its phenomena and escapes beyond them, and like its tutelary deity, Hermes-Thoth, it radiates constant clarity from an essence that is, in its appearances, volatile, brilliant in one sense, but dark, obscure in another. For alchemical knowledge itself has the character of that which must remain hidden. It is occult, and not only in the common sense of being hidden from sensory perception, *for it does not cease being hidden even when it is revealed*. Its hiddenness is a qualitative aspect of its revelation.

In our quest for a configurative ontology of alchemy, we must heed the above reflections. We are not necessarily concerned to produce the ontology that the alchemists themselves possessed, if for no other reason than that *ontology* was not their term. Rather, we want an ontology that allows the alchemical secret to operate upon and within us, even in its qualitative hiddenness. We must not pretend we are unaware of the efficacy of modern chemistry and the mathematical structures that seem actually to underlie that efficacy. But equally we must not limit our perception of alchemy to the procedures recoverable from the alchemists' texts that, though obscurely expressed, give instructions that are clear enough to allow them to be performed in a modern chemical laboratory.

One cannot speak of alchemy without paradox, for alchemy itself is, essentially, irretrievably paradoxical. We can only speak of it as something that—in spite of the enormous body of surviving alchemical literature from cultures spanning the globe—only exists as a quest for its recovery. The philosopher's stone arrives from a condition that never was but always is, a

phenomenality that does not appear. It is the outcome of a procedure whose consequence is a precondition of its efficacy.

In the Latin Middle Ages, what could be accomplished would have been constrained by natural law as set down by God in his creation, understandable by the natural light of human reason and its finitude—that would be a sense of the matter according to Thomas Aquinas. But anything is possible for God, who of course transcends his own laws and whose intellect is infinite; therefore, by the grace of God, impossible deeds might be accomplished. The possibility of the impossible: the miracle.

As noted, the alchemist worked per impossibile. He produced wonders. He required not only correct procedure transmitted by an adept but also the grace of God. Or that is a particularly Christian way of putting it. But there were, of course, pagan and Muslim alchemists, not to mention Indian, Tibetan, and Chinese, for whom right timing, perfected attention, and the concentrated repetition of meditative procedures were the context for the work. But I neglect these latter here, since their relation to spiritual practice and self-transmutation is so explicit.

There is also an analogy in alchemy with the creation of a golem, as Moshe Idel discusses it (Idel 1990). God gave Abraham the power to create life. Any sufficiently pious latter-day rabbi might share in that capacity. The motivation for making a golem was to perfect and manifest piety: that the rabbi's intimacy with the Divine Presence be such that the power of creation shall have accrued to him. In this sense, what one *makes* reflects what one *is*. Hence also the analogy of the *art* of the alchemist with *art making* in general, or a certain attitude toward it. One works at the creation of a work of art as a context for the perfection of one's own nature. Analogously, the transmutation of metals mirrors the transmutation of one's self. The creation of a poem or painting redounds to the being of the poet or painter. I see myself in the mirror of my work. This is possible because the philosopher's stone, which works upon and with the prima materia that underlies all phenomena, pertains precisely to one's soul as well as to nature. For the soul itself is a created being. There is a hidden substance that pervades both nature and the soul. Find it and achieve. To work the secrets of transmutation by means of operations with the stone is to possess a thing that is situated where the dualities of spirit and matter, soul and body, res cogitans and res extensa do not obtain. Cartesian dualism is

precisely a rejection of this aspect of alchemical "ontology." Its absolutization of the measurable for its quantitative rigor and its rejection of the discovery of perfection through proportionality would be its signs. The artist (in both senses) has come into possession of that which transforms one's own being, and such a thing is simultaneously that which brings the substances of the natural world to their perfection. It is not only that the prima materia and the four qualities of fire, earth, air, and water underlie reality; there is also a substance that is the soul and that is susceptible to transmutation by the same means. But that substance—whether *lapis philosophorum,* elixir, *alkahest* (universal solvent), or prima materia—is a part of the natural world only in the sense that what is obviously *not* a part of nature is *secretly ensconced within it.* The adept shares in that secret and thus can work miracles, in particular transmutation. God's grace can be sued for, *extra ecclesia* (outside the church), by a mastery that masters that which would be its vehicle.

The secret substance of the alchemist is thus a paradoxical entity: it both is and isn't part of nature, and its working is per impossibile.

Ignorance here is not a condition for further research, in itself an innocent enough motivation. In a Christian context, it is the risk that one might *not* be in possession of God's grace, that one is deluded in one's identification of the efficacious secret. The hazards to which the alchemists fall prey are moral hazards not only in that the alchemist indulges the venality of his greed and may be practicing charlatanism. The deeper hazard is that one might be laboring under a profound delusion. For a Christian, where right belief is itself the measure of salvation, to stake one's soul on possession of the Great Secret—the common substance that underlies nature and one's own soul—is to hazard one's own perfection without the church's blessing and without the legitimizing authority of institutionally asserted divine law. It is to take on *oneself* the great work of salvation. Alchemy anticipates modernity not in the sense of Promethean technology but *in the exercise of a Promethean spiritual autonomy:* one seeks an access to Being that, though fully resonant with divine ultimacy, stems from beyond God and beyond the gods. One takes upon oneself the responsibility for one's own realization and for the restoration of the world. And yet that self is not one's private ego or one's confirmable identity, since it only applies as one intuits that one's Being is Being itself. The surrender

of the self to God is unmediated by the church. But it is a surrender nonetheless.

The Origin of Alchemy in Metallurgy

The transmutation of the artist by his work cannot be understood by psychology in most of its contemporary guises, with the exception perhaps of Jung, whose work rather explicitly recovers alchemical perspectives. But the psyche of most modern psychology is not quite the soul. It too confidently allows one's psyche an autonomy from the rest of being by which, paradoxically but unrecognized as such, it dominates the rest of being. No doubt this requires a lot of qualification. But my point is that the transmutation is only reductively subjective, and its ontological implications are not to be swept under the proverbial carpet.

Zosimos speaks of an "intolerable force" that the figure in his dream-vision suffered and that both he himself and the metals with which he was working suffered as well, and he tells us that all of this together comprised his further initiation in alchemical work. When he says this, he is speaking of a transformation that is not a psychological realization expressed symbolically through changes in the appearance of substances in his alembic. He is speaking about a *spiritual* transformation suffered *by the metals themselves*. Transmutation did not *symbolize* spiritual work; it *accomplished* it—both for the metallurgist and the metals with which he worked. Soul and matter participated in the same spiritual itinerary (Burckhardt 1991).

As noted earlier, ancient metallurgy and mining technology are the historical antecedents of alchemy (Eliade 2000). Metals and other minerals were planted in Earth during creation. Metals and minerals were perceived to *grow* there. They experienced cycles of birth, maturation, perfection, dissolution, rebirth. These processes of growth and completion could be nourished by the metallurgist's art. Smelting metallic ore—separating it from adulterating admixtures, purging it through fiery baths and furnaces—perfected it: brought out from the ore a true nature occulted by impurities.

For modern chemistry, the traditional metals—gold, silver, mercury, copper, iron, tin, and lead—cannot be transmuted into other elements without recourse to atomic decomposition at the level of the atom's nucleus. But the very theory of the differentiation of elements in this manner would

not appear until many centuries after the first generalizations of metallurgy in alchemy. Metallurgists did separate different metallic and mineral substances, and the procedures by which they did so would become indeed the techniques of early chemistry in the modern sense. But when they were concerned to transmute base metal into gold, they were actually working with the preparation of metals so that they would show visible properties suited to their uses. But from the beginning, alchemists were concerned with whether these apparent transmutations were transmutations all the way down. Were the hidden qualities implanted in the ore really brought out or only a superficial appearance of them? The metallic ore must be purged again and again, again and again submitted to an "intolerable force" that will break it down, testing the change in its inner being. But in the Egypt of Zosimos's time, transformed appearances themselves were put to uses that were "of the essence." What were those uses?

According recent scholarly speculation, Zosimos belonged to a class of persons attached to the Egyptian temples who, besides being priests, were artisans in temple workshops (Grimes 2018). Zosimos would have prepared metals for the temple sculptors who fashioned god figures, either for temple or funerary use or to be sold to private persons for their private shrines. The work of these metal-working artisans was properly what the Greeks call telestics, which, as noted earlier, means imbuing a statue with the presence of the god. The metal or stone itself had to be initiated (*telestics* etymologically could mean the art of initiation). Now, the initiated statue is not a three-dimensional *representation* of the god. It is not something that might be improved upon by the application of finer techniques of sculptural visualization or replaced today by the latest developments in holography and virtual reality. Accuracy in image doesn't matter when you don't have access to what it is an image of except through what appears through the image itself. To change mined ore or unhewn stone into a sculpted image imbued with the presence of the god, nothing short of the god himself coming into the work is exigent. And that god inhabits the imaginal. Whether its theophany occurs depends in part upon the imaginal power of the artist, but that power is as much sensitivity to influx as it is active expression. Therefore, what that god is in its being cannot be decided from an analysis of the image apart from the living time of its showing itself in the working. Its being is a secret ensconced in its apparency. Its production happens in the middle voice.

It should be clear from all this that there are other ways of connecting an image to its contents than judging how well it represents its subject. When that subject approaches in imagination from a region of being that has no model, surely your most reliable strategy is to keep paying attention. Attention is as essential to the operation as metallic ore or a well-stoked furnace. One had to exercise what Herbert Guenther calls discriminative-appreciative awareness (Guenther 1975) in culling the qualities that would be *transparitional*[*23] to the presence of the god. But the ontological status of what comes to apparency cannot be judged without attending the conundrum of its appearing there: the intransitivity of alchemical *poiesis*.

The artisan sculpts an image of a god not to remember the god in its absence but to attract that deity into the image. The deity's manifestation would be inseparable from the way the metal or limestone's appearance affected its celebrants. But the way that appearance came to be was the work of the metallurgist as much as the work of the sculptor. The art of imbuing material forms—and not only by means of their canonical images—with transcendent significance had already been fully realized by the early Egyptian dynasties, where literally thousands of god images in various different media were realized. There was in fact a technique or *techne* to it, a kind of know-how—but a know-how inseparable from the mystery of sentience itself as concretely patent for both sculptor and devotee, and not discontinuous with the life of the materials themselves.

Alchemy, of course, was not particularly concerned with conjuring god figures, but the transmutation of metal nonetheless involved the summoning forth of the divine presence into or indeed *from* common matter. And the notion that substances could be perfected to reveal thaumaturgical properties was an area of sacred investigation inherited from temple metallurgy.

The alchemist felt he was contributing to the processes of natural perfection by adding the *poiesis* of his *techne* to the *poiesis* of the *physis* of naturally created matter.

The Emerald Tablet *and the Language of Alchemy*

The *Emerald Tablet,* also called the *Smaragdine Tablet* (*smaragdine* simply means "emerald"), an Arabic text from late in the eighth or early in the ninth century CE but attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, epitomizes the

Great Work, the magnum opus of alchemy. Its famous opening utterance: "That which is Below corresponds to that which is Above, and that which is Above corresponds to that which is Below, to accomplish the miracle of the One Thing," asserts the correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm, the cosmos and humanity, the astrological archetypes and the energies of personality, the Platonic essences and the materially existent substances that "participate" in them. The "One Thing" is the magnum opus, the Great Work itself, configured as if an entity. The Zen Buddhist phrase "the great work of birth and death" comes to my mind. In my reading, the correspondence between "that which is above" and "that which is below" also holds between the ultimate character of transcendent Being and immanent materiality. These correspond not because they share properties but because they share *being devoid of them:* both Being itself and material apparency are essentially *essenceless.*

Interpreted platonically, the doctrine of this correspondence would be a challenge, if not an out-and-out scandal. "That which is above" (the ineffable: that which is beyond cognitive determinacy) and "that which is below" (matter: the receptacle of form, the *receiver* of cognitive determinacy) are both *beyond* cognitive determinacy and are thus likened to each other in both directions: matter is like the One in that, being prior to form, it is formless; the One is like matter for the same reason. Unlike some Platonists, the alchemists embraced this *scandal*—that the acme and the nadir of what looks like they should be at opposite ends of a hierarchy are indistinguishable. One can reach the ultimate principle not only by ascending to it but also by penetrating in the opposite direction, *through* matter rather than through a *flight* from it.

If that which is to be realized must be sought by a descent, clearly transmutation must begin with *putrefaction:* the reduction or analysis—the breaking down—of the substance to be transformed into its underlying primitive material. But this primitive material is itself the agent of transmutation: the presence of the divine principle *in* the matter or even *as* the material substrate of the apparent thing. The philosopher's stone is the agent of transmutation. It is composed of the mercury of the philosophers, which in turn is the prima materia. The series of defining terms is intransitive. The relation between acme and nadir is the *ouroboros,* the snake biting its own tail. The matter to be transmuted harbors in itself the

agent of transmutation and stands to be revealed as the very thing it is to be transmuted into.

The terms of alchemy shelter authentic, spontaneous, *oriented* noetic events from the very positivity of the utterances that they give rise to when treated as objects. (Oriented noetic events: mental acts aiming at the *requiescence* of appearance unto Being.) At the same time, these paradoxes seek to preserve those positive utterances themselves as possible stimuli, to help in the induction of authentic, spontaneous, oriented, noetic events. In the alchemical context, the materials are imbued, or are revealed to always already having been imbued, with the divine property—the principle of valor or value that properly belongs to sentience itself. Consciousness is transmuted and expanded through its working with matter. Awareness itself is the divine property in matter. When the alchemist succeeds in his working, subject and object are given by the same evidence, and Cartesian dualism is healed, *avant la lettre*—returning to a state that predates dualism.

What must be honored in alchemical language is its power to orient and induce. But the possibility of determinative positivity—the idea that language possesses truth-content independent from concrete, transitory intuitive acts (and independent also from intuitive acts not working with material substance)—must be circumspectly warded off. Univocity must be circumvented, ambiguity or polysemy (words or signs with multiple meanings) *attentively* produced. Thus two applications of the same term may shift their sense, often in close proximity to each other, while retaining their *orienting* and *inductive* potentials.

A vulgar (nonalchemical) philosophic term strives for univocity and is wary even of subtly deviating meanings. It enforces uniformity and eschews spontaneous variation. But an alchemical term freshly induces meaning, each time out. A term appears suddenly, projecting itself forth in the middle of a paragraph of seemingly coherent discourse, like a transmutation suddenly apparent in the alchemical vessel. Still, terms accumulate meaning, as a person accumulates experience. The induced intuition remains as it were in the term's aura (its connotation, its poetic nuance) as possible sense, as further use occurs.

As noted earlier, multiple terms in alchemy have the same sense or meaning, and one term can have multiple senses. Uses of these terms in

different contexts accumulate sense for a single but unstatable fieldobject. A field-object: the accumulating reference for multiple terms which orient intuition toward a single focus, a focus that is not so much an object as a field. Orientation contains its goal. The goal remains in use. And yet is out of time.

The Odyssey and Alchemy: *Hermes and Odysseus*

Karl Kerényi observes that Hermes, at least secretly, and not only Athena, is a guiding spirit of the *Odyssey* (Kerényi 1995). Hermes's qualities even seem to color episodes where he himself is not apparently present. For instance, the episode in Book IV, where Menelaos describes to Telemachus how Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea, responded to his questions concerning whether he (Menelaos) would return safely to his home in Lacedaemonia, we are treated to the pranks and capacities of a primordial shape-shifter. Proteus changes through a sequence of forms—lion, fire, water, and so on—before assuming an anthropomorphic appearance, at which point Menelaos and his companion lay hold of him. Both his own nature and the means by which his daughter, Eidothea, informs Menelaos that Proteus might be subdued are redolent of Hermetic stealth and subterfuge.

Like the element mercury, Proteus will not hold his form. Does he indeed *have* a true form, among his many transformations? One might wonder not only what that true form might be but also what the mutable matter is that allows Proteus to appear in anthropomorphic guise when he wishes and also to change form with such alacrity. Any deity, indeed, might exhibit a capacity for transmutation, but when a deity does so, he or she partakes of the Hermetic character. Hermes himself, of course, knows such malleability very well: remember his transformation into a morning mist so that he might pass through a key hole in his mother's cave. But Hermes quickly changes not only his appearance but his roles. The very multiplicity of his realms of relevancy bespeak an uncanny mutability.

The Menelaos-Proteus episode suggests that to deal with a god one must in some manner become that god: one must align oneself on his attributes, resonate with his particular set of vibratory frequencies. Menelaos himself must do what he can to transform his appearance in order to enter the very

ambience of Proteus. And the courage that he must summon to transform himself smacks of Hermetic hilarity and Homeric sarcasm: he and his three chosen companions must don seal skins and bed down among the sea cows Proteus counts each day before he himself beds down with them for his midday snooze. The salient obstacle for Menelaos and his companions is the putrescent sea stench of the seal skins.

The very name of Proteus (*protos,* meaning "first," "primordial") suggests the prima materia of the alchemical art that Hermes will in a later day sponsor, the primordial substance to which metals must first be reduced before their transmutation into silver or gold might be accomplished. (Viewers of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* will remember Odo, the shape-shifter, who must dissolve into a pool of mercury-like f luid to change into anything whose appearance he can imagine.)

If Being for the classical thinkers is identical with determinate form (that to be is not merely to exist so much as to be this or that *kind* of entity), the protean quality of Proteus-Hermes might suggest that the philosophers have seriously erred in denying to Being its roots in the *indeterminate*—the impossible character of neither being this nor that, or of changing from this to that in the very moment when its identity seems confirmed; that the root of the indeterminate is Being itself.

Notes on the Greek Magical Papyri

The *Greek Magical Papyri* (Betz 1986) constitute a collection of spells, charms, talismans and solemn ceremonies for invoking discarnate entities, summoning deities or becoming them, gaining political or financial power, or winning sexual favors, spells which date from the 100s BCE to the 400s CE. Their aims range from sensual, acquisitive, vindictive, and otherwise mundane desiderata to invocations of incorporeal beings to discover one's identity or affinity with them. They are a veritable storehouse of Hermetic procedures and syncretic tableaus, often conjoining god figures from the many cultures (Egyptian, Greek, Hebraic, etc.) that were in communicative and combinatorial flux in late antiquity. Though each performance of such a ceremony focuses its general procedure upon the particular circumstances of the magician or his client, there is a subtle consequence for the practitioner's own being that is not entirely dependent on what the

procedure is intended to achieve or even if it achieves it, as I mentioned above.

The magician recites to the god, in liturgically specified language, the god's cosmic function. He creates images and performs actions to draw the deity or daimon into the operation. The working of the rite brings the god's cosmic function to bear. The ritually and liturgically stimulated imagination links the magician or his client to the daimon's cosmic identity, so the magical formulae establish an identification of the practitioner with the god by imaginal and verbal means. Imaginal:[*24] the active engagement of the mind in the production of images, to be distinguished from "imaginary"—that is, unreal; and "imaginative," having the power "to make things up." In one rite among the *Papyri* the practitioner is enjoined to proclaim to the entity he is invoking (Betz 1986, vii, 37): "For you are I, and I am you; your name is mine and mine is yours."

The god must work *for* me if he *is* me. If I can energize his image in my mind, the logic of magic compels the effect. In the *Greek Magical Papyri* we see that the magician's imaginal preparatory act might involve:

- Drawing the image of the god.
- Gathering, constructing, assembling objects associated with him or her.
- Manipulating objects (specified in some detail) whose very *description is imaginally charged.*
- Mixing potions out of specified, god-associated substances, whose sensuous properties are often metaphorically suggestive or imagistically powerful and/or violent: body parts of sacrificed, usually small, animals: beetles, salamanders, frogs.
- Writing out the text of the spell, drawing sigils, and performing various operations calligraphically.
- Intoning sequences of syllables. A person initiated in these procedures presumably would have learned how to vibrate the Barbarous Names and intone the syllables.

The vibration of such syllables carries the mystery of the conjunction between sentient awareness and materiality. The sequences of syllables belong to language but do not carry content in normal semiotic fashion.

They are not signifiers in any ordinary sense. Their significance is that their intonation induces qualities in the practitioner's body and in the subtle ether that is set into vibration by the practitioner's voice.[*25] That ether is the *sentient interface* with the material atmosphere, and it is that interface—the interface between matter and sentience—that constitutes the proper milieu of telestics, magical conjuration, and alchemy. That etheric interface allows the calling forth of beings whose ontological constitution (for us the ontological constitution of sentience itself) is not conceptually available but nevertheless inalienably present and active. The etheric interface mediates the god.

Hermes is the god of the interface in general, but here he is explicitly of the *limina* between sentience and matter, between Being and Apparency; indeed, he represents all the spaces intervening between contrasting conditions of being that can neither be deemed identical with each other nor held apart. Like Being and Apparency in our Parmenidean configuration, magical (Hermetic) liminality obtains where regions of being are in my sense indefinitely dyadic: *no longer* one, but *not yet* two.

All the actions the practitioner performs to summon the god—the materials gathered for the ceremony and the time chosen for gathering them, the concrete act of copying out the text or drawing the sigil, the time chosen for the ceremony—are integrated in a single rite or related series of rites, every aspect of which contributes materially to seal the participation of the magician's intent. But as much as it is engaged to induce an effect, the rite has the role of focusing the will, rendering its aim determinate, contacting its daimonic interlocutor, and establishing an imaginal atmosphere that colors the rite, qualifies its aim, and suffuses the being of the practitioner. The entire onto-phano-poietic situation is created in the rite: the magician establishes his or her identity with the god for the time of the rite, and the magician having done this becomes an inalienable factor in his or her being henceforth, regardless of whether the aim is accomplished. Everything depends upon the fact that this identification is for the time of the rite and under the control of the magus, and yet has pertinence in the magician's being beyond that. No doubt that is because the ultimate identification of the practitioner with the god that is the practitioner's true nature occurs through a series of transparitions, the ultimate member of which is unimaged, ineffable Being itself. The magician establishes an

identity for himself that is circumscribed by the operation in which it occurs, but at the same time, this identity in an ambiguous fashion (if for no other reason than that the ultimate identity has no identity) redounds to the magician more or less permanently. The master magician maintains the ambiguity of that distinction and individuates around the fact of it; a lesser practitioner is inevitably confounded or subliminally confused by it.

Ideally, the ceremony *detaches* the practitioner from his or her aim while at the same time determining it and rendering it inalienable. How "detaches"?

First of all, ceremonial practice detaches its practitioner from the mundane atmosphere of existence outside the rite. The magician separates himor herself from the ordinary world, even as the purpose of the rite is to effect something *in* that world. But the result is clearly that the magician detaches from concern with quotidian affairs, and yet, in the same performance, the particular quotidian affair with which the ceremony is concerned is itself brought into the context of the operation.

The ritualization involved in theurgical mastery unifies a whole cache of capacities, not the least of which are the objective gaze of the artist and something like the objectively obedient hand of the surgeon. The theurgist works by creating the entire atmosphere and context of the operation, and as its creator, the theurgist must maintain a nondual combination of subjective intention and objective attention—just as an artist does. The aim is defined and contained. Extraneous impulses are monitored and excluded or spontaneously integrated into the work. The materials are attended to with objective severity, coolness, and detachment but nevertheless monitored continuously by immediate sensitivity. As the nature of sentience itself is detached from its content, the objectivation of both subjective and objective aspects of the work redound to that detachment, too. Detachment is the mark of realized apparency, because Apparency and Being in the accomplishment of the work are not two. Detachment detaches not from Apparency but from its reification. The magus must become transpicuous to the middle-voiced creativity that engages him or her as the magus stands outside the magic circle in which the summoned entity shall appear.

As Ezra Pound said in an interview, "technique is the test of sincerity" (Plimpton 1963). Obedience to what it takes to get something done is a measure of one's intent to accomplish it. But if that something to be done is

a summum bonum rather than an object of venal craving, technique and sincerity are subsumed in Being itself.

Performances of magic enact magic performatively. For the time and scope of the rite, whatever comes to appearance is magically and numinously charged, and the magician's very being is imbued with the apparent qualities that he or she summons.

The two sides of the performance, therefore, are causative-material and onto-phano-poietic. Magic makes things happen. Magic determines what and how things appear to be. Magic supplies the magician with a thaumaturgical persona that, if properly donned, detaches from compulsive worldly concerns but also from fixation upon one's own personae, one's own masks, less intentionally devised. Properly executed, ritually realized identities may be assumed with the intent to liberate oneself from identity, one's personality or ego. The rite may induce this liberation by exhausting the temptation to reify one's being—one's ego—in so egregiously grandiose a fashion that the entire operation solemnly revels in its own absurdity and in the concentrated seriousness with which it is performed. Inwardly and silently—at the center of, but infinitely apart from, the actual aim of the rite—the ultimate being of the god (as a filter or configuration of Being) proves the true being of the magus, liminally sited; that is to say, cited as Being itself.

You could say that there is an infinite gulf between Being and all appearances, since no correction or refinement of an appearance will adequately render the being it seems to embody; on the other hand, there is no gap at all, since Being itself is *right there* in the concrete occasion of any appearance.

Magical Charge, Ritual Violence

Some remarks on the violent acts committed against small animals: frogs, turtles, salamanders, birds, and so on. These acts focus and activate powers that are carried by imagery. The energy of an image is charged by the violent precision of the act that resulted in it. The image of the act is energized by the precision demanded and the violence required for that act's

performance. The image is charged up by the vividness of the instruction to perform the act, even before it is enacted.

In the massive bull sacrifices performed in Homer, the moment of the kill when the knife blade is put to the animal's cervical artery is accompanied by a formal ululation of the women attending—a collective cry that goes up as an expression of the contact between the living and the dead, between the mortal realm and the immortal gods, a contact that the sacrifice effects. The moment of death is the seal of maximal liminality—the transition point between life and death, which, configured in the rite, is also the transition point between the human and the divine. Through the act of killing, the will is asserted to effect that contact, that transition. The sacrifice of small animals in magic procedures, though on a diminished scale, no less enacts that intent. The amoral or *transmoral* (beyond good and evil) character of the *numen fascinans et tremendum,* the fascinating and terrifying quality of that which is beyond life and death, of the ineffable source of the incursive dynamic, is marshaled by the sacrificial intent and its performance. It is as if by committing the kill in a sacred manner, a manner articulated by the verbally charged if technical instructions—the magical formulae—one's act itself were transported across mortal and moral thresholds. As if.

The seriousness and moral (karmic) hazard of magical practice is measured by the engagement of the magician's actual involvement with the fact of death and the inalienable ignorance attendant upon it. One's being in life is inalienably intertwined with one's death, inseparable from reason's *incapacity* to determine death's and therefore life's ultimate nature. It is the solemnity of that agnosia—that ignorance—that is pertinent here. Its ontological indeterminacy is brought to fruition within the magician's intent: *the impossibility of circumscribing anything about death within the positive arrangements of mundane rationality.* As a knower in the modern rational sense, one must inhabit one's ignorance and yet, in spite of this, experience the affective seriousness, the gravitas, the solemnity that attends it. That which obtains beyond the closure of what one thinks one knows of life must at the most inescapable level engage the curtain that falls or rises at the entrance and exit points—birth and death—of living existence. Ancient humanity's nearly universal involvement with sacrifice—literally, sacred killing—testifies to the solemnity with which, before the advent of universally repressive civilized consciousness, intelligent humans faced the

cavernous ignorance of their ontological condition. We are ourselves not one iota more knowledgeable in this regard than our ancestors, than indeed any sentient creature whose awareness, without conceptual elaboration, knows death in the sense that it engages all its forces to avoid it. For the act of sacred killing expresses the will to engage with that which divides us in death's mystery. We moderns or post-post-moderns no longer take the step of engaging our will at this level, and yet the amount of intentional killing engaged upon by the most advanced civilizations wildly exceeds anything imagined by our so-called primitive forebears—our will to exterminate whole populations of our own species, not to mention species after species en masse, expunged through the destruction of animal habitat. And yet the small deaths prescribed by these ancient magicians seem to distance our civilized and empathic souls from the cruelty of enacting them—from Hermes's turtle to the bugs and frogs and salamanders of the *Magical Papyri*. If we recoil from the imaginal power of the act of sacred killing, the act that more than anything else engages us with death's mystery, it is in that *recoil* that we might access and assess the imaginal power and the functional efficacy of the sacrifice.

Civilization progresses upon the engine of the repression of death through the distancing of ourselves from what remains a universal, if culturally mediated, condition: the unknown meaning of our mortality. Any notion—conceptual, imaginal, mythological—of the nature of birth and death is therefore inalienably configurative. Given our ignorance before an inalienable fact, as before the essenceless but undeniable pressure of Being itself, we court analogy. We make things up. Our deepest wisdom is to catch ourselves in the act and release ourselves from the compulsion to believe our own invention. As William Butler Yeats ruefully put it in "The Tower" (Yeats 1959):

> Death and life were not
> Till man made up the whole,
> Made lock, stock and barrel
> Out of his bitter soul.

Language and Act

Let me see if I can unravel the imaginal power of the sacrificial act a bit further.

There are acts involved as elements in the ritual construction of an image. The drawn or verbally chanted image is an aspect of the *construction*—the determinate construal—of what it is an image of. It would seem that what it represents, what it is an image of, is itself constructed. We are responsible therefore for its identity, its meaning, if not its physically transcendent corporeality. But is the very sentience of the being to be sacrificed part of this transcendent corporeality? I do not configure that sentience. It is not accessible to me through any construction of it. And yet, in the same way that my own essenceless being is essencelessly known in me, I have looked a fly in the eye and for a few extended moments shared with that being our utter ignorance of each other's state.

Even to single out an object from the welter of phenomena among which it is at play, or to determinate at what scale of physical being we are considering it, requires our full participation. The "thing in itself " beyond our construction of it can only be discerned through our own further configuration. And yet to use such reasoning to exculpate ourselves from responsibility for our act of sacrificial murder, feels like a rather sleazy abuse of our own intelligence, our own sentience, our own capacity for constructing our responsibility. On its own, independent of our configuring, in its transcendent corporeality, the object is not even an object. It falls back and only *is* as Being itself. And yet.

We are talking here about a living being, sentient and driven by its own exigency, its own experience, even its own will to live. It is not an object, and if it fall back all the way to being, it does so on its own ground, not on the ground of *our* ignorance, or *our* speculative reaching toward a knowledge of all things, as if absolute ignorance might flip in an instant and prove to be omniscience after all. How must we comport ourselves in regard to this? Must we not remain empathic spirits, identifying ourselves vicariously with that beetle, frog, or salamander who, like ourselves, are best comprehended, like ourselves, if only in principle, as capable of transformation from being a mere being to being Being itself?

The gradual growth in our awareness over the ages of a realization that these creatures are sentient, too, and should not be slaughtered for our

magically ululatory ecstasy, expanding our sentience into the hallows of nonentity, of death itself—this growth in awareness is surely something like an ethical achievement. But what have we done with that achievement? We certainly have not grown into our realization that all beings are just as we are, avatars of Being itself. If we sacrifice our will to sacrifice only the more grandly to slaughter one another and the inhuman sentient creatures of the natural world to boot, what are we to make of this grand, empathic accomplishment?

I myself do not practice ritual sacrifice. I seek the atemporal harmonic in which all temporalities cohere or juxtapose, or otherwise dissolve or transcend or realize themselves eternally. In a Now without difference. Not one, not many. Not that which is present or that which is deferred. Seriously, without the exigencies of reified thinking, I do not see myself as advancing in that direction through transgressive acts of sacrificial murder, since I do not see how to do this without completely suppressing the empathy for other creatures, the expansion of the scope in which empathy seems inseparable from the transition to Being. And yet neither the palpable agnosia of our mortal situation nor our passion to violate the skrim of death are alien to me.

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If it is possible to further unravel the discourse on such matters, it awaits another episode of configuration. Meanwhile, I will pursue to the end the thoughts that stimulated this comment.

Every construed or constructed entity is a made thing. Its objectivity includes the act that objectifies it, renders it an object. This is *poiesis* through and through. Thus every magically charged image includes covert reference to the act that produced it. But that act itself is conditioned, even directed, by the image it also deploys in conducting its action. Again, the act uses an image, but its performance also *is* an image. I become the image of the act when I perform it.

Now, the act itself, as extended in time, conducts itself through something like a tunnel that, holding its image, tunnels through the time of its own performance. I produce in actuality that which I enact in image. Here image is not *representation;* rather it embodies an *imperative.* I do not say, “I act in conformation to this image that I hold out for my own

imitation"; rather, "I live my action through this image, moving in a time that my receptivity of that formed and informing motion will continuously measure." The intransitivities, self-reflections, indeed the obscurities in these remarks are of the essence. Further analysis will not definitively unpack them. They require trying them out on one's own thought-flesh that they might issue in a flash of recognition. Otherwise, one lets them remain situated in their own obscurity.

Magical operations are *time-span forms:* like musical performances or poetic texts, they compose the very time of their enactment—a time that encloses not only their *composition* but also their *reception*. But receptivity is an inalienable part of the act of composition: the internal feedback that simultaneously accompanies each gesture of making. The artist's (or magician's or alchemist's) management of the degree to which this is so is an essential ingredient of his or her art. Too much self-consciousness derails the performance. Inattention utterly wrecks it.

Will and desire, performance and receptivity, have temporal structures. One must align oneself on what Gerrit Lansing phrased as "the emphasized characters of time" (Lansing 2009, 261). Robert Kelly wrote many years ago that "the sage in his wisdom loves waiting for the right moment" (Kelly 1964). Time is the currency of action, its undergirding possibility of fluency. The aim of one's action flows toward one in the time-span form the rite configures. Time itself is tinctured by the magician's will; that is to say, his or her capacity to project tinctured energy upon the concrete temporal intervals spelled by the rite.

The utterance of speech quite generally can be situated ontologically as an action that impels its content to appear and perhaps to occur. Spells, invocations, and the charging of charms, sigils, and talismans are specialized functions of speech (and if for no other reason fall under the provenance of Hermes-Thoth), but such practices also configure a nature of speech itself through that function: they make speech itself don a certain appearance with which it is not familiarly accoutered. However, utterances of ordinary language, from this angle, also allow beings to come to their appearances in the world and/or in the mind that utters them or hears them uttered. Magical formulae are simply speech itself seen from a certain angle of deployment. Language *compels* apparency. In magic, will focuses language. Magic is a certain *register* of speech, a certain pressure applied.

Hermes himself is the artifex—the actor, the artist, the alchemist. *The text itself is the secret* (Corbin 1960, 33).

FOOTNOTES

*1 Works of art and thought in my conception (as worked out with George Quasha in our book about the video-installation artist Gary Hill) have further life in the sense that the creative impulse that gave rise to them continues to live and create in the minds of their readers (see Quasha and Stein 2008).

*2 For the *ab-grund,* or groundless ground, as Martin Heidegger adopts it (see Wolfson 2014).

*3 Spoken in a personal communication.

*4 For how my version of Parmenides addresses these stipulations, see Stein (2020).

*5 If pantheism is the doctrine that God and nature are identical, Pan-entheism is the doctrine that all of nature is within God and God is within nature, but God also extends beyond it.

*6 See Eliade (1971), particularly the last two chapters, for his general theory of mythic time as ahistorical and paradigmatic.

†7 I apologize for the coinage. First, *poiesis,* from which we get the word *poetry,* means making, producing, creating, fashioning, bringing into being very broadly. *On,* as in *ontology,* is the participial form of the Greek verb "to be" (infinitive, *einai*). *Ontopoiesis* would be "the making of being"—what gods and magicians accomplished (traditionally), what poets and artists create (modernly), and all of us perennially—and in oncoming times, perhaps—responsibly! *Ontogeny reimagines theogony*. *Phano* in different forms means "to show" and "to cause to appear" and indicates apparency as such. *Phanopoiesis* would be the aspect of fashioning that causes something to appear in awareness. It is the manipulation of sentience concretely. Ezra Pound uses the term *phanopoeia* in his *ABC of Reading* for an aspect of what poetic imagery accomplishes, but I make it out more generally. Not only

poets induce apparency. Magicians, politicians, lovers, doting parents, Madison Avenue and Silicon Valley con men, con men more generally —and we do it for each other all the time. So, *onto-phano-poiesis* is the induction of the appearance of Being. In my thinking, magic.

*8 Thumos is the etymological root of thymus, as in the gland, by the way, but is by no means identical to it. There is a lot of interesting material not only on the thumos but also on how early Greek consciousness experienced what we call the body (see Onians 1951; Snell 2011). The word soma, as in psychosomatic, was not used for a living body at all but only for a corpse. Up until a certain moment, the body was seen as an assembly of parts, not anything like a whole person. But in the classical moment, our body suddenly crystalized and became that which the famous classical sculptures idealized. Early images adorning Grecian urns often look more like stick figures than Greek gods.

*9 In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the first words of Genesis, "In the beginning," are given as En arche. The first words in the Gospel of John—"In the beginning was the Word"—were also in the original Greek En arche, echoing not the Hebrew but the Greek version of Genesis. In both cases, not only the first events in time but also the principle of creation itself is indicated.

*10 Technically an utterance is called performative if it performs the action it denotes. "I now declare this bridge open," "I surrender," "I now declare you husband and wife" are obvious mundane examples.

*11 Henry Corbin uses the term imaginal to indicate a particular function of the image-making faculty, treating it as the aspect of the human being that directly acts in a middle realm—a "mesocosm"—between the human soul and the angelic order where the ultimate archetypes are lodged. The active imagination finds imaginal entities and topographies through which a conversation with the angel of one's being communicates. The Jungian disciple and heretic (heretical to Carl Jung) James Hillman (1926–2011) truncates the Corbinian relation of the imaginal to angelology in his effort to elevate the status of psyche itself to a position of ontological primacy (at the expense of body and spirit). Corbin energetically denied what he took to be Hillman's abuse of his terminological distinction. See Kingsley's Catafaque (2018), which in itself is a passionate and indepth vision of Jung primarily through

Jung's Red Book (2009). See also the Corbin-Jung correspondence (Corbin 2014) for material relating to Hillman.

*12 The Greek verb gignomai, meaning to "bring into being", has many derivative usages as in the array of its derivations given above. Frequently, as with gignomai, the main vowel that in the first person active singular is an iota (i), becomes an epsilon (e) in many of its inflected forms.

*13 *Yab-yum,* which means "father-mother," is, in Tibetan Buddhism, the representation of the male deity in sexual embrace with his female counterpart.

† 14 For an excellent presentation of the history of modern transfinite arithmetic written for philosophers with minimal technical knowledge, see Tiles (1989).

*15 George Quasha's formulation initially appears in his poem *Word-Yum: Somapoetics 64–69* (1975) and elsewhere, where a gnoseme is "a minimal unit of discourse establishing a transformative relationship between word and consciousness. From this source philosopher Herbert V. Guenther (along with Steven D. Goodman) derives his extensive discussion of gnosemic language in *Matrix of Mystery: Scientific and Humanistic Aspects of rDzogs-chen Thought* (1984).

*16 This fragment appears in a Latin medical treatise by the fifth-century CE writer Caelius Aurelianus, in his discussion concerning the cause of homosexuality (see Drabkin 1950).

*17 Bishop George Berkeley (1685–1753) was the Anglo-Irish philosopher, whose phrase *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived), became the catchphrase for later philosophical idealism that holds that all of being is mental.

*18 Philosopher Rudolf Carnap famously wrote that "the problem of Now worried Einstein seriously. He explained that the experience of Now means something special for men, something different from the past and the future, but that this important difference does not and cannot occur within physics" (Carnap 1963, 37–38).

*19 Nous authentias is usually glossed as "the mind of sovereignty," but I think the cognate "authentic one" more appropriately expresses to a modern ear what this nous portends. It might literally mean something

like “the one whose being is his own,” though the phrase is used in Christian contexts to indicate spiritual authority. The dialogue does not assert authority or display sovereign power but wields its authority only in the sense of imparting a truth in which the interlocutor may be confident.

*20 Carl Jung distinguished between the archetype and the archetypal image: the atemporal pattern itself as opposed to its coming to appearance in the individual psyche or in a specific culturally retained and distributed, usually visual manifestation. (Similarly, the Platonic forms in general appear only in the objects that participate them; however, the Platonic visionary who is not limited to sense perception can image the forms.) One might say that the connection of the Jungian archetype to the archetypal image is like that of Being to Apparency. The archetype does not appear, but it determines the form of what does. Similarly, Being does not appear, but everything that does appear appears to Be. From the point of view of Parmenides, one can see that Being itself is *the* archetype: there is only one of them. Even the archetypal structures that the Jungians discern (and the Platonic forms of the Platonic visionaries) are appearances, discerned not by the senses but by the Jungian intellect that discovers them or the Platonic ascetic that ascends to them. But they are appearances nevertheless. Being would be the archetype of the archetypes; the formless form of forms.

*21 In Hindu and Buddhist Tantra and other pantheistic (everything is divine) or Panentheistic (everything is within a divine principle that nevertheless transcends everything) traditions that are serious about finding the sacred principle in everything, the initiate must acquire the courage to willingly undergo horrific experiences and to transgress established norms of behavior because failure to do so expresses the depth of one’s ignorance of the universal inherence of the sacred. Transgression becomes a measure and a test of the depth of one’s gnosis.

*22 Isaac Luria (1534–1572) was a rabbi practicing in Safed whose interpretations of the Kabbalah came to be the mainstay of later kabbalistic theology. In particular, his understanding of the creation as a withdrawal of the ultimate identity of the deity from a part of himself to make a space in which creation might take place, is interpreted as God’s

concealing as well as revealing himself through creation. That the first act of the deity is to withdraw from himself suggested that negation precedes creation to a succession of idealistically oriented thinkers from Jacob Boehme through Hegel and Heidegger himself: that that which comes to appearance conceals as well as reveals the nature of Being. Wolfson's book shows how the sometime Nazi and unrepentant Nazi sympathizer owed one of his signal notions to a Jewish thinker.

*23 The term *transpraitional* means that the being symbolized by a given level of appearance is rendered actually present in the moment of the apparition of the symbol. A sense of *(cont.) ta'wil* would be that the deepest hermeneutics leads through the symbol to the "instant-presence" of not simply its meaning but of the being that is its emanative source.

*24 Henry Corbin introduces the term *imaginal* to indicate a particular function of the image-making faculty, treating it as the aspect of the human being that directly acts in a middle realm—a "mesocosm"—between the human soul and the angelic order where the ultimate archetypes are lodged. The active imagination finds imaginal entities and topographies through which a conversation with the angel of one's being communicates. The Jungian disciple and heretic (heretical to Jung) James Hillman (1926–2011) truncates the Corbinian relation of the imaginal to angelology, in his effort to elevate the status of the psyche itself to a position of ontological primacy (at the expense of body and spirit). Corbin energetically denied what he took to be Hillman's abuse of his terminological distinction. See Kingsley's *Catafaque* (2018) which in itself is a passionate and in depth vision of Jung primarily through Jung's *Red Book* (2009). See also the Corbin-Jung correspondence (Corbin 2014) for material relating to Hillman.

*25 In some instances, the Barbarous Names include what appear to be the names of known deities, nested in among repeated syllables with no such content. In this way, the reference to the deity will have some effect on the etheric efficacy of the incantation as a kind of tincturing or flavoring of the spoken words, but the important point is that the semantic content—the reference to the deity—is just a tincture, a hint. It does not surmount and enclose the syllables that carry it, as it does in ordinary semantically saturated, meaningful speech. The sound of the

incantation is not subordinated to its semantic content. It energizes and conjures the colors of its ether.

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